the weekly
Standard

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BY CHARLES KRAUTHAMMER

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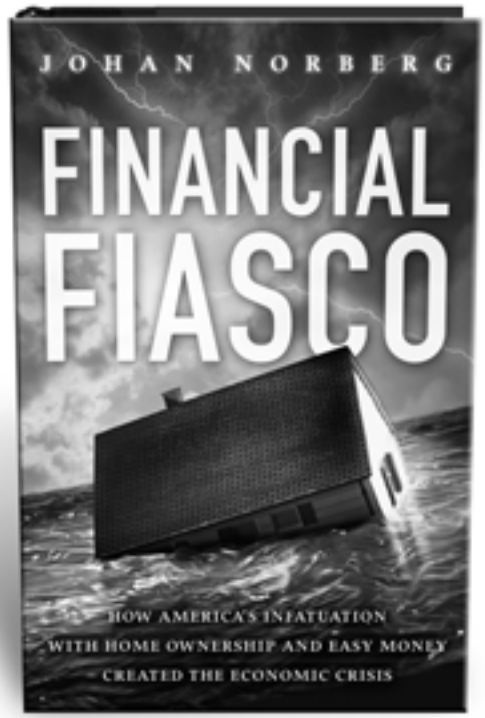

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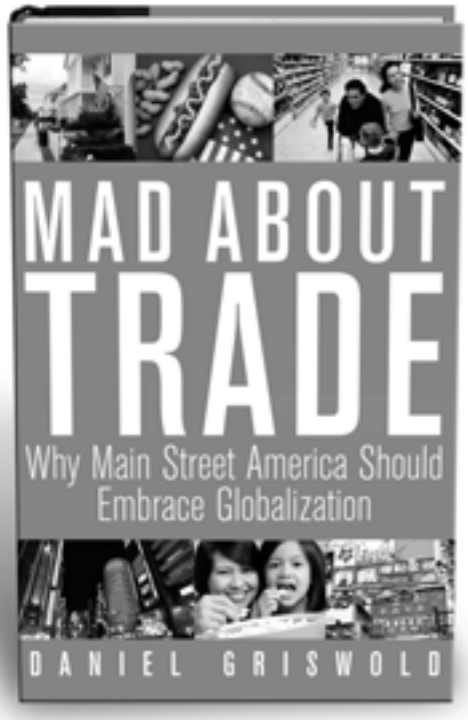

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Contents

October 19, 2009 • Volume 15, Number 5

2 Scrapbook ..... *A Typical Nobel*

4 Casual ..... *Andrew Ferguson, cave man*

5 Editorial ..... *Tax Hike in a Lab Coat*

Articles

6 Drawing Conclusions *A Danish political scientist revisits the cartoon controversy* ..... BY CHRISTOPHER CALDWELL

8 A Vain President, or a Weak One? *Americans don't like pushovers* ..... BY FRED BARNES

9 Cameron's Turn at Bat *Hope and change, Tory style* ..... BY IRWIN M. STELZER

13 The White House Chickens Out *No meeting with the Dalai Lama—China might object* ..... BY ELLEN BORK

Cover: Thomas Fluharty

Features

14 Decline Is a Choice ..... BY CHARLES KRAUTHAMMER
The New Liberalism and the end of American ascendancy

22 The Incurable Vietnam Syndrome ..... BY MAX BOOT
Distorting our foreign policy for three decades and counting

25 Standing Down ..... BY TOD LINDBERG
How popular should America want to be?

Books & Arts

28 Reason for Faith *The two ideals need not be rivals* ..... BY RYAN T. ANDERSON

30 Signing the Blues *How London commemorates its resident immortals* ..... BY EDWARD SHORT

32 Forgotten Founder *The French colonel who wrote the book(s) on counterinsurgency* ..... BY ANN MARLOWE

36 Dime-a-Dance *Surrounded by blogs, what's a critic to do?* ..... BY NATALIE AXTON

37 Scholar-Craftsman *Merrill Peterson, 1921-2009* ..... BY EDWIN M. YODER JR.

39 Why Me? *The Coens wrestle with the God of the Old Testament* ..... BY JOHN PODHORETZ

40 Parody ..... *Obama the Prize Winner*

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BPA INTERNATIONAL

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A Typical Nobel

A columnist in the *Times* of London had a thunderous reaction to the news of the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to President Obama last week.

"Rarely has an award had such an obvious political and partisan intent," wrote Michael Binyon. Stating that the Norwegian Nobel Committee clearly intended one last slap at George W. Bush and hopes Washington will "re-engage" with the world, Binyon went on to say that "the prize risks looking preposterous in its claims, patronizing in its intentions and demeaning in its attempt to build up a man who has barely begun his period in office, let alone achieved any tangible outcome for peace."

Except for that mysterious word "re-engage," and with one other point, The Scrapbook is entirely in agreement with Michael Binyon. The other point is Binyon's fundamental premise which, in The Scrapbook's view, is mistaken: that the Nobel Peace Prize is to be taken seriously. No, it isn't.

Begun at the turn of the 20th century as penance for his invention of dynamite, Alfred Nobel's peace prize has missed the mark as many times—perhaps more—than it has hit it. To be sure, by definition, there have been occasional statesmen who deserved recognition (Theodore Roosevelt, Gustav Stresemann, George C. Marshall, even Mikhail Gorbachev) and private citizens who have done more good than harm (Jane Addams, Martin Luther King, Aung San Suu Kyi, Norman Borlaug).

The prize has often gone to earnest do-gooders (the Red Cross, Georges Pire, Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan, Fridtjof Nansen) and popular humanitarians (Mother Teresa, Albert Schweitzer, the Dalai Lama). But there have also been some surprising omissions: Gandhi, for example, and any number of people whose particular actions or long careers did considerably more to ensure global peace (Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Ronald Reagan) than the long list of professional pacifists and League of Nations/U.N. bureaucrats routinely honored in Oslo.

In recent decades, moreover, the prize has been awarded to people who have arguably done more harm than good in the world (Mohamed ElBaradei, Jody Williams of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Oscar Arias Sánchez) or can only be described in cynical terms (Rigoberta Menchu, Jimmy Carter). And sometimes the prize takes a sinister turn, awarded—presumably for ideological purposes—to people or organizations that not only fail to practice peace but actively promote ill-will, bad faith, and violence. For every Lech Walesa, Shirin Ebadi, or Andrei Sakharov there is a Yasser Arafat, Le Duc Tho, or International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War.

Where President Obama stands in this spectrum it is difficult to say. The prize is sometimes hastily awarded to politicians whose efforts ultimately fail (Henry Kissinger, Shimon Peres, Willy Brandt) but the remarkable thing about the Obama award is that nearly everyone—critics and admirers alike—agrees that it is based exclusively on hope and expectations, not achievement. Which is another way of saying that, like many famous decorations and awards, the Nobel Peace Prize is largely devoid of meaning—and has very little, if anything, to do with peace. ♦

Who Necklaced Haiti?

It got awkward last weekend when Bill Clinton, the special U.N. envoy to Haiti, was addressing a group of investors invited to the island to promote job growth. Because it was Clinton who, on coming to power, spearheaded a U.N. economic embargo that destroyed hundreds of thousands of Haitian jobs, and Haiti's fledgling middle class along with it. Haiti had more than 100,000 manufacturing jobs at the time. It now has (according to the State Department) 17,000. The goal of the embargo was to restore to power the radical demagogue Jean-Bertrand Aristide, whose rule—sometimes direct, sometimes indirect, but always violent—lasted from the invasion Clinton ordered in 1994 until an uprising in 2004.

"I hated it," Clinton said of the embargo, "but when you have people being burned to death with tires around their neck, that's important too. We had to bring an end to that."

Whoa! The grisly practice Clinton describes, known as "necklacing," originated among anti-apartheid activists in South Africa. It was imitated in Haiti, where it was rechristened "Père Lebrun," after the biggest tire dealer in Port-au-Prince. It was Aristide—Clinton's guy—who exhorted the armed mobs of his ruling Lavalas movement to use it. A speech he gave in late September 1991 extolling Père Lebrun, helped trigger the coup a few days later. The military junta that removed him was no parliamentary democracy. But it did not practice Père Lebrun.

What happens when a democratically elected government aspires to become an undemocratic tyranny? Is it ever permissible to remove it? In the

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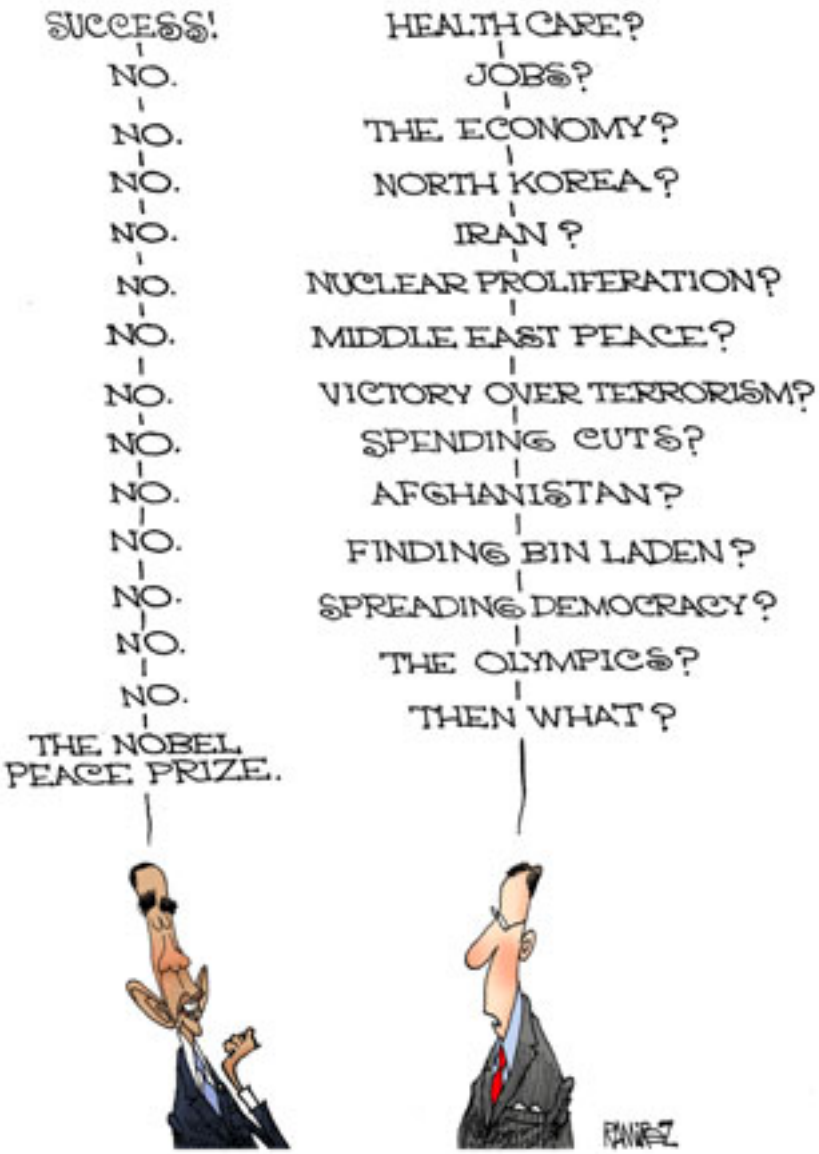

present, tragic case of Honduras, the Obama administration is answering no. The Clinton administration gave the same answer in Haiti 15 years ago, and put the U.S. Marines at the beck and call of an anti-American dictator.

Whether the abuses of Aristide were worse than those of the junta that replaced him is a question that may divide reasonable people. (The Scrapbook's view is that Aristide's was by far the crueler dictatorship.) About necklacing and the embargo, though, there is no ambiguity. Clinton did not destroy the Haitian economy to prevent people burning others to death with tires around their necks. He destroyed the Haiti economy in the name of people burning others to death with tires around their necks. ♦

Book 'em, Roger

The news coming out of publishing is all doom and gloom these days—doom and gloom about the future of publishing, that is. How nice to report that the news coming from Encounter Books is about something much more important: American society. The firm has just this week kicked off a series of Encounter Broadsides: 48-page pamphlets, produced in a matter of a few weeks—that's light speed by publishing world standards—to allow an expert commentator to make a substantial contribution to a debate while it is still going on. With so many institutions of American life under assault from the left, we need muscular arguments and as Encounter's publisher (and Weekly Standard contributor) Roger Kimball notes, "Sometimes the best defense is a broadside." The broadsides are a fine bargain at $5.99, and that they are intended to be read in a single sitting fits The Scrapbook's idea of a good time.

The series kicks off with three titles: *How the Obama Administration Threatens to Undermine Our Elections* by John Fund, *Obama's Betrayal of Israel* by Michael Ledeen, *Why Obama's Government Takeover of Health-Care Will Be a Disaster* by David Gratzer. These will shortly be followed by Andy McCarthy on the politicization of the Justice Department, Stephen Moore on the economic crisis (hold on to your wallets, folks), Victor Davis Hanson on the Obama administration's foreign policy, and, we're told, Michael Barone on immigration policy. We're somewhat biased in believing that publishing these folks puts you on the side of the angels—as a quick search of this magazine's archives will show. A tip of The Scrapbook's homburg to Kimball and Encounter. ♦

Sentences We Didn't Finish

'Gender politics is always just beneath the surface in this town, because the inequality in power is stubborn and persistent. Even on Capitol Hill, only . . . " (Dana Milbank, *Washington Post*, October 9). ♦

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Casual

Park Disservice

I read that the moviemaker Ken Burns spent six years filming his new PBS documentary, which is roughly twice as long as it takes to sit through it. I started to watch it last week but lost interest pretty quickly and moved on to other things. For all I know it's still on. Every time I wander by the living room, there it is, shimmering from the ol' flat-screen: soft-focus sunrises and sepia photographs of old-timers, the background tweeting of birds and the ponderous experts in half-light, speaking of "our deepest and best selves" and "who we are as Americans." And the mournful music, of course—always the mournful, suicidal music, filling the air with the weepy piano and the sniffling fiddle and the dolorous dulcimer, as played by the Hemlock Society Jug Band 'n' Country Jamboree Quartet.

For his new documentary Burns chose as his subject, honest to God, the National Park Service, one of the federal government's most elaborate bureaucracies. The guys down at the Bureau of Labor Statistics must be livid they didn't get to him first. Burns is a great admirer of the park service, as I am not, which may account for my quick loss of interest in his lengthy video tribute. The show's title claims that the park service is "America's Best Idea." I don't think it even makes the top ten. Is it better than drive-thru liquor stores or the WetVac? I went to Yosemite once and was touched as if with celestial fire by the obligatory awe, and I am still grateful, in an abstract way, that it hasn't been developed into the Yosemite Woodlands TowneHome and Golfe Community, with blocks of condos rising along Yogi Bear Court and Boo Boo Circle. But this great gift, negative though it is, was given us by the old park service, not the new.

I don't think Burns recognizes the crucial distinction. The old park service was composed of grizzled, slightly disreputable outdoorsmen willing to civilize themselves for the sake of a regular pay check. Today's park service, dating back to the 1970s, is composed of graduate students. You can still trace their varying influences in many of the nation's parks, where a fortuitous lack of funds has sometimes stymied the plans of modernizers and preserved palimpsests of what the old rangers valued, in sharp contrast to the new. What the old rangers valued was pleasing the general public.

HAL MAYFORTH

As a boy I visited Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, the longest cave in the world, and I returned not long ago, startled to see how quickly the unchanging grandeur of nature can change when it's left in the hands of federal employees. I don't mean the cave had changed—at least I don't think it's changed. I couldn't tell for sure, since our public servants have barred the public from most of this public place. Visitors used to see the cave from guide boats drifting silently on underground rivers. Rangers lit the way with torches, and in an act of unapologetic showmanship they would reveal the vastness of the darkened spaces by tossing flaming streamers to the ceiling. Ancient mummies lurked in the shadows. Outside a grand old hotel with stone fireplaces and plank floors beckoned from a stand of shade trees. There were tennis courts and shuffleboard and a swimming pool, and movies at night.

All have since been "discontinued" by the park service. It replaced the hotel with a concession done up DMV-style. Weeds sprout from the shuffleboard and tennis courts—games are a frivolous distraction from the rangers' important task of instructing visitors about the dangers visitors pose to the cave. The presentation is purposely dull and didactic; I can't imagine what a little boy would make of it. The most spectacular spaces, such as the Cathedral and Snowball rooms, are open only intermittently, and one ranger said he hoped that even these might soon be declared off-limits. "The resource is just too precious," he said. If rangers discovered the cave today, we might never hear about it.

Down the road from Mammoth Cave, just beyond the federal property line, are the Diamond Caverns, family-owned for nearly a century. The lodge is built from stone and cedar. The rock formations are lit with brilliant lights, some colored, and come shaped like bacon strips, haystacks, wedding cakes, and altars. They inspire much clowning from the guides. If you have the money you can get married there, with music bouncing from the limestone walls. Poor Ken Burns would bust an artery at the tastelessness and profiteering.

The park service that he reveres, however, usually triumphs in the end. The guide told me the ultimate dimensions of Diamond Caverns remain a mystery, but if one of the tentacles can be shown to intersect underground with any part of Mammoth Cave, Diamond immediately "becomes the property of the park service."

She said it with a shudder, as if contemplating a death sentence.

Andrew Ferguson

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Tax Hike in a Lab Coat

Democrats, liberals, and the mainstream media (but we repeat ourselves!) want to convince us that Montana senator Max Baucus's "America's Healthy Future Act of 2009" is a serious, moderate effort at health care "reform." It's not. It's a tax hike dressed in a lab coat.

The Baucus bill, scheduled to come to a vote this week in the Senate Finance Committee, imposes new taxes on insurers that the companies will pass on to consumers. Its employer mandate is a tax on small businesses that will make owners think twice before hiring more workers. The penalty for noncompliance with the individual insurance mandate will hurt younger and lower-income Americans. Meanwhile, the increased fees on medical devices amount to consumption taxes that will raise the price of contact lenses, wheelchairs, prosthetics, and dentures, among many other medically useful things.

JASON SEILER

It gets worse. As James C. Capretta of the Ethics and Public Policy Center points out, the Baucus plan does particular damage to anyone at the lower end of the income scale seeking to improve his condition. Capretta notes that because the bill's subsidies to purchase health insurance phase out rapidly, and income and payroll taxes are always waiting just around the corner, "the effective, implicit tax rate for workers between 100 and 200 percent of the federal poverty line would quickly approach *70 percent*—not even counting food stamps and housing vouchers." So much for helping the unemployed get into the work force. The president has already signed into law a tobacco tax increase and a tariff on Chinese tires that will raise prices for low-end consumers. So much for helping the working and middle classes.

The Baucus plan rewards insurers by forcing millions of new customers to buy their product, limiting choice and competition, and increasing prices by mandating the types of coverage that insurers must offer. It's pro-big business and anti-small entrepreneur. It costs a ton of money—$829 billion over 10 years, according to the Congressional Budget Office—and doesn't even reach the goal of universal coverage. There are plenty of reasons to be skeptical about the plan's cross-my-heart-and-hope-to-die pledge to cut the deficit, since that promise relies on future cuts to Medicare and Medicare Advantage that Congress is unlikely to accept.

Is it worth paying all these taxes and spending all this money for a plan that doesn't even cover everybody? The public doesn't think so. Last week polls by the Pew Research Center and Quinnipiac University both found that a 47-percent plurality of Americans oppose Obamacare—even after the president has spent the past month "calling out" everyone who disagrees with him. The opposition makes sense when you consider all of the cheaper and more practical ways to spur innovation, lower prices, and cover more people in the health markets.

Take the "small bill" proposal that Jeffrey H. Anderson outlined on our website last week. A consumer who wishes to purchase health insurance in the individual market would get the same tax break employers do. He could shop across state lines for the insurance plan that matches his personal needs at the best price. Furthermore, the small bill plan would lengthen COBRA eligibility so that the recently unemployed could continue to pay premiums and receive their old coverage for up to 30 months after losing their jobs. The plan would allow companies to incentivize healthier lifestyles for employees, cap punitive damages in medical lawsuits, and increase federal support for state-run high-risk insurance pools.

The small bill fits on one page where the Baucus bill as amended runs to 262. The small bill would cost $75 billion over 10 years; the Baucus bill, at a minimum, $829 billion. The small bill raises no taxes; the Baucus bill raises taxes and fees by more than $500 billion. And yet the Beltway conventional wisdom is that Baucus's expensive new entitlement, middle-class tax increases, and convoluted regulatory regime is the sensible, centrist policy. Please.

Isn't it time to reject the false choice between Obamacare and the status quo?

—*Matthew Continetti*

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Drawing Conclusions

A Danish political scientist revisits the cartoon controversy. BY CHRISTOPHER CALDWELL

Mohammed, center, in a Gustave Doré illustration of Dante's 'Inferno'—one of the images Yale decided to remove from Jytte Klausen's book

Jytte Klausen's book on the Danish cartoon crisis of 2005-06 opens in an unusual way—with a hand-wringing preemptive apology from Yale University Press for not reprinting (despite its profession to be "an institution deeply committed to free expression") the 12 caricatures of the prophet Muhammad that gave rise to the eponymous crisis in the first place. Yale's decision, justified on the grounds that re-publication "ran a serious risk of instigating violence," jars with the spirit of Klausen's book, which is patient and deeply informed and seeks to complicate our understanding of an event that is easily oversimplified. Klausen, a Brandeis political scientist, an expert on Europe's Muslim elites, and a native Dane, may exaggerate the possibilities for common ground at the time of the crisis. Yet a willingness to go out on a limb can be helpful in approaching a topic like this. Yale has served Klausen poorly in refusing to follow.

In the late summer of 2005, Flemming Rose, the culture editor of the Arhus-based daily *Jyllands-Posten*, heard that a famous children's author was having trouble finding an illustrator for a book on Muhammad. Cartoonists were scared that getting involved in the project would draw the attention of angry Muslims. So Rose decided to test how much of a chilling effect the fear of radical Islam was having on the cultural life of his country. He commissioned 42 cartoonists to draw a picture of Muhammad as they saw him. A dozen responded. Rose printed their work. Many of Denmark's 200,000 Muslims, who make up about 4 percent of the population, were upset. Two weeks later they protested peacefully in front of Copenhagen's city hall.

Four hardline Danish imams went further. They contacted the Egyptian ambassador, Mona Omar Attia, and in December sent a delegation to Cairo with a portfolio containing the cartoons—and some images of violent anti-Muslim pornography. Talk about the cartoons began to circulate. Islamist opposition politicians worldwide began to use it to their ends. On February 3, the television preacher Yusuf al-Qaradawi, head of the European Council for Fatwa and Research, called for a "day of rage" against the cartoons. Over the following week, mobs of young Muslims demonstrated, rioted, and rampaged in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Indonesia, Iran, Lebanon, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, Syria, and Turkey, not to mention England and France. Over 200 people died. Credible death threats were made against the cartoonists and editors.

This is a book with a villain in it: the then-Danish prime minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who is now the secretary-general of NATO. Klausen calls him "the prime minister who would not say sorry." To the Danish Muslim community leaders, Danish businessmen, Muslim diplomats, and others who urged that he apologize for the actions of *Jyllands-Posten*, Fogh Rasmussen had a consistent reply. To issue a government apology for a private act

Christopher Caldwell is a senior editor at THE WEEKLY STANDARD *and the author of* Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: Immigration, Islam, and the West.

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of free speech would be to compromise a principle basic to Denmark's democracy. "You cannot apologize," he said, "for something you have not done."

Klausen, as ever, believes there is more to it than that. Shortly after the publication of the cartoons in September 2005, eleven ambassadors from Muslim countries sent a letter to Fogh Rasmussen expressing their displeasure with the cartoons. But not just with the cartoons, Klausen insists. Muslims saw them as part of a "coordinated campaign of denigration," which included racist speech on the radio and provocations by politicians in the anti-immigrant Danish People's party (DF). This was the opportunity, in Klausen's view, that Fogh Rasmussen should have seized to forestall the violence that erupted four months later.

Those who do not share Klausen's view (this reviewer included) will respond that the diplomats' letter did two things that made a productive response impossible. First, the letter made a veiled threat of violence. ("We may underline that it can also cause reaction in Muslim countries and among Muslim communities in Europe.") Second, it sounded a Qaddafi-esque note by urging Denmark to "take all those responsible to task under the law of the land." Klausen notes, though, that the Organization of the Islamic Conference sent a different version of the letter that omitted this insistence on arresting those responsible. But how was Fogh Rasmussen to reply to the second, nicer letter without being seen to knuckle under to the threats in the first, nasty one? At any rate, 80 percent of Danes opposed an apology.

Klausen sees three possible reasons Fogh Rasmussen held his ground. First, that he simply underestimated Muslim anger at the cartoons. Second, that he was under the thumb of the DF, which, while not part of his governing coalition, supported much of his program. Her third explanation: that Fogh Rasmussen wanted to move the country in what she calls a "neoconservative" direction. This is a protean word. For Klausen it means primarily the idea that spreading democracy can serve U.S. (and by extension Western) strategic interests. She makes the provocative and well-supported point that in Egypt—where the government of Hosni Mubarak was imperiled by the democratic reforms that its American ally was urging on it—the cartoons may have been a way of pushing back.

Klausen is much less convincing when it comes to Danish-U.S. relations. Like many Europeans, she mistakes the Project for a New American Century (a tiny four-person operation with which this magazine used to share office space) for a vast think tank. The former presidential speechwriter Michael Gerson, Vice President Dick Cheney, and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld were not, as Klausen writes, "members" of PNAC. Rumsfeld, moreover, was a frequent target of its attacks. And if Denmark was moving towards neoconservatism, the Bush administration was offering it little in return. On the contrary, the administration's attacks on *Jyllands-Posten* and its defenders were extraordinarily, even gratuitously, harsh.

Klausen shows that the mobilization against the cartoons was a new type of protest. "This was not a campaign against the capitalist exploitation of natural resources or other issues recognizable within the normal European politics of left versus right," she writes. "Demands were made in the name of the *ummah*, or community of believers." She does not, however, always see what a big difference this makes. Denmark, a country of 5 or 6 million people, was being attacked in the name of a community of 1.5 billion. It is not just the categories of left and right that get confused in such a case, but the categories of majority and minority.

Why shouldn't Danes have been worried, not just over their interests abroad but over the loyalties of their Muslim fellow citizens?

While never seeking to soft-pedal the real threats of violence in Denmark, Klausen argues that if you disentangle the different motivations of the protesters, you will find they were not as monolithic as they looked. Arab diplomats, Danish imams, and populist firebrands of the Indian subcontinent "shared no consensus on exactly what was the problem with the cartoons." That may be true. The question is whether that opened up to Denmark any realistic alternative path for dealing with the cartoon crisis. It probably did not.

Klausen makes the point more generally. "Western Europe's fifteen million Muslims are not a coherent political bloc," she writes. This is wrong. They are not a coherent cultural bloc. They come from different countries and speak different languages, they are of different races and classes, and they follow different schools of Islam. We do well to bear that diversity in mind. But on certain important political issues, European Muslims are about as politically coherent as it is possible for a subculture to be. Israel is one such issue. The Danish cartoons turned out to be another. The cartoon crisis was a shock for Europe in the way the O.J. Simpson trial was for the United States. It disproved the cliché about how, once you swept off the blinders of prejudice, all communities ultimately want more or less the same thing. Danish Muslims—with some extraordinary exceptions like the brave centrist Naser Khader—did not feel very differently about the cartoons than Muslims elsewhere.

"It looked as if a coordinated global protest movement was under way," Klausen writes. "But goals varied, and the protest movement was fragmented." At the risk of insisting, it is not true that goals varied. Idioms varied, rationales varied, philosophies varied, interests varied, and tactics varied, but in all branches of the protest throughout the world, the goal was the same—to bully the Danish government into bringing *Jyllands-Posten* to heel, and to secure for Muslim themes and iconography immunity from the mockery to which those of all other religions have been and remain subject in the West.

Danes, Klausen laments, were for the most part incapable of decoding the different rationales for Muslim protest. They "heard only that they were being told to change their laws and ways." This was indeed an unsubtle way of looking at things. But it was an accurate one. ♦

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A Vain President, or a Weak One?

Americans don't like pushovers—especially pushover presidents. BY FRED BARNES

George Will suggested last week that President Obama's self-referential speech on behalf of Chicago's bid for the 2016 Olympics may lead to his being known as the "vain" president. Maybe, but worse things have been said about a president and probably will be if Obama declines to send substantially more troops to Afghanistan and rejuvenate his counterinsurgency strategy. He'll be called a "weak" president. And the label will stick.

A weak president is vulnerable, politically and otherwise. In Jimmy Carter's case, being seen as weak in dealing with Iran and the Soviets was a major factor in his defeat by Ronald Reagan in 1980. Americans don't like pushovers, especially pushover presidents. Obama is at risk of becoming a pushover.

Afghanistan is his test. Public support for the war has fallen sharply this year, especially among Democrats. And Obama's liberal base is pushing him to rebuff General Stanley McChrystal, the commander in Afghanistan, and scale back the war effort. Reversing course on a critical issue of national security because of domestic politics—that's an act of pure weakness.

At the same time, Obama will create another problem for himself should he spurn McChrystal's request for up to 60,000 additional troops to carry out the very strategy the president adopted in March and reaffirmed as recently as August. Rejection will alienate the uniformed military, and they are more popular than the president. When the Pentagon is hostile territory, the president suffers.

Obama in Copenhagen

NEWSCOM

A president with a more impressive record leading up to a pivotal decision on Afghanistan wouldn't be in such a perilous situation. But it's of Obama's own making. He has little margin for error. His record over nine months as president is at the heart of his problem. Three aspects in particular stand out.

The first actually goes back to the presidential campaign. Obama criticized President Bush's decision to invade Iraq, insisting it was the wrong war to fight. The right war, the good war, was in Afghanistan. This wasn't a fleeting distinction. It was a central point of his candidacy.

It raised a question: Was Obama's stand on Afghanistan merely a cynical device to make him look like a tough-minded foreign-policy strategist and up to the job of commander in chief? The answer appeared to be no when he adopted an aggressive counterinsurgency strategy in March. As it turns out, that decision was easy. Democrats were supportive. Crunch time on Afghanistan didn't come until last month when McChrystal reported that the war will be lost without more troops.

Deploying more soldiers will cost more money and could produce more casualties, and there's no telling how long the war will last. But prevailing in Afghanistan is what the Obama presidency is supposed to be about. If he flinches now, we'll know we were misled. Obama talks about defining issues. For him Afghanistan will be one, but not in the way he might have hoped.

The second aspect involves the choice facing the president between continued pursuit of his policy in Afghanistan, McChrystal-style, and concern for his political future. Infuriating his antiwar base would complicate his prospects for reelection in 2012, all the more so if the war lingers without exit in sight. Any president would worry about that.

The downside to letting personal political interests prevail is that Obama would look duplicitous and weak. He could offer high-sounding reasons for ratcheting down

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the war, but everyone would know the real reason—domestic politics.

A president who'd bucked his party from time to time could get away with this. But Obama's record is the opposite. As president, he's been subservient. He's yet to say no to congressional Democrats. He's carefully remained on the side of every liberal special interest. Yielding on Afghanistan fits this pattern of weakness. Caving again will underscore it.

The third aspect is his foreign policy. Had the president dramatically stiffened the effort to force Iran to give up its nuclear weapons program, had he recruited allies in this cause, had he gone ahead with the antimissile system in Poland and the Czech Republic over Vladimir Putin's objection, had he become a champion (rather than a critic) of America's interests in the world—then, the situation would be quite different.

But Obama's foreign policy has been one of complaisance. He's apologized, deferred, and backed down. Changing course in Afghanistan, under pressure, would be viewed as another instance of presidential lack of resolve. According to an old sports adage, when the going gets tough, the tough get going. Obama hasn't.

Even before coming to a decision on Afghanistan, Obama has looked fainthearted. His aides spent last week offering excuses for turning against McChrystal and counterinsurgency. Fighting the Taliban is unnecessary because it's no longer closely tied to al Qaeda (actually it is). Al Qaeda is nearly defeated (it's not). Sending more troops would be bad public relations (quite the contrary). The Afghan government, having stolen an election, is frightfully corrupt (no surprise there).

Absent the shift in public opinion, we'd be hearing none of this. And Obama wouldn't be scared that Afghanistan would do to his presidency what Iraq did to Bush's and Vietnam to Johnson's. He'd be committed to winning. The war in Afghanistan provides an opportunity for leadership. A strong president would seize it. A weak president would look for a way out. ♦

Cameron's Turn at Bat

Hope and change, Tory style.

BY IRWIN M. STELZER

Manchester

There is something reassuringly familiar about a Tory party conference—the annual gathering of Britain's conservatives. Lots of smartly dressed investment bankers holding down or angling for seats in the Mother of Parliaments; lots of personal assistants who, according to the *Times* of London, are well groomed, privately educated, and named Daisy, Rosie, or Poppy. But it took some doing to get over the party's chosen slogan for the coming election campaign: "Ready for Change." Too close to what Obama has in mind for us colonials.

But it's probably an accurate description of the mood of British voters. The opinion polls show the Tories with a large enough lead to win a majority in the next parliament, and to survive almost any unpredictable event that might occur between now and the election, most likely to be called in May of next year.

Gordon Brown, the current occupant of No. 10 Downing Street, is not only beyond uncharismatic, but presides over a country that has a soaring deficit, a depreciating currency, rising unemployment, and busted banks. All of this hit after Brown squandered Treasury revenues during the fat years on a massive expansion of public sector payrolls, financed by a series of what here are called "stealth taxes"—60 in all by most counts.

Worse still has been the rise in crime to a point where there are very few places one would walk about in the evening. A generation of feral children prowl the streets, with public drunkenness making many city centers no-go zones on weekends. A refusal to fund new prison construction means that even hardened criminals with multiple convictions are given early release for lack of cells. Meanwhile, the welfare system makes it utterly irrational for millions to choose jobs over the dole and disability benefits. Throw in the fact that Brown ostentatiously flirted with the idea of facing the electorate before abandoning it in the face of bad poll numbers ("bottling out" is the English expression) and you have a conviction on the part of the Tories that the election is in the bag almost no matter what they do. In private, most Labour MPs agree and are preparing for a long spell in opposition—or for careers in the private sector.

Still, the prime minister in waiting, young Etonian and former public relations man David Cameron, warned his party, "This is not some week of celebration." Delegates were told not to be photographed in a celebratory mood—which made it unfortunate that Cameron was photographed by a leading tabloid swilling champagne.

Cameron has brought the party a long way since the days when it was riven by feuds between those who deposed Margaret Thatcher and those who remained loyal to the Iron Lady, its candidates unable to compete with the charismatic Tony Blair, its policies mired in the days when the hang-'em-and-flog-'em set dominated party conferences. A long way, but not far enough to convince more

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David Cameron addresses the Tory conference

CONSERVATIVE PARTY VIA GETTY IMAGES

than 28 percent of voters that he has fundamentally changed the party. Voters know that if the Tories win a substantial majority, close to 200 of its MPs will come from business and banking backgrounds—and such things matter in a Britain still aware of class distinctions. So the Tories had to tread carefully as they set out their electoral stall.

It goes something like this: Britain is broken—for all the reasons listed above. It is time for a change. We will build prisons to house 5,000 more miscreants. We will reform the educational system to emphasize discipline and the three Rs, introduce the Swedish-style system that allows parents and entrepreneurs to build and run schools, with the state providing £5,000 per student, and give the best state schools complete independence. We will change the tax structure to encourage marriage. We will tax the high-alcohol drinks that the young quaff until oblivious and prevent supermarkets from selling them at a loss. And we will require anyone receiving disability benefits to undergo a medical examination to prove he or she is unable to work. All of this is part of an effort to repair the torn social fabric of "broken Britain." But these are details. Cameron is most concerned about shoring up the family, which he told a cheering conference is the rock on which communities, and in turn a civil society, are built. He wants to shrink government, eliminate its intrusive inspections and rules, and encourage individual responsibility.

But Britain is not only broken, but broke. On the economic front there is to be a new austerity to cope with the massive deficit. The cost of government will be reduced, in part by cutting the number of MPs by 10 percent, and by the usual assault on waste and inefficiency, although potential ministers are having a hard time identifying any such. With the exception of the lowest paid and the military, pay for public sector workers is to be frozen for a year, but there will be no significant layoffs in a sector bloated by Labour's addition of 800,000 workers as it built its client state. Retirement ages will gradually increase. Benefits to the middle class are to be reduced, as are ministers' salaries. Pensions to new MPs are to be capped. And a new marginal tax rate of 50 percent (up from 40 percent) will be imposed on high earners, part of the shadow chancellor's pledge, repeated eight times in a 30-minute speech, to adopt policies that recognize that "We are all in this together," which is intended to be the modern Tory equivalent of Benjamin Disraeli's "One Nation Toryism," described by its present-day enthusiasts as "a national community from which no citizen is excluded." Whether modern Tories are true heirs to Disraeli's vision is another matter.

But some features of the welfare state will remain. The weekly child benefit of between $20 and $32 per child, depending on age, will continue to be paid, but only to families earning less than $80,000 (£50,000) per year; free television for pensioners will remain (they will not have to buy the mandatory license to watch TV and support the bloated BBC); and winter fuel payments will be made to everyone, regardless of income.

As a political matter, the Tories must move in the direction of "We are all in this together" if they are to overcome the fact that the leadership is dominated by a small group of rather wealthy (inherited in many cases) men. So far, they have succeeded. In a recent election for a vacated parliamentary seat, Labour played the class card, following the Tory around dressed in tuxedos, and lost by a large margin. But Cameron knows that even the English heartland that forms the core of his support has changed since the last time the Tories won an election in 1992. Then, 6 percent of voters in England were nonwhite; that percentage has doubled. And in the rest of the country the change is even greater.

The Tories are helped by the fact that Labour, too, recognizes it must pare spending. Brown is trying to distinguish his cuts from those proposed by Cameron, claiming he is restraining spending out of necessity, while the Tories actually enjoy the exercise. Both parties have said they will continue to increase real (inflation-adjusted) spending on the National Health Service, which

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accounts for some 15 percent of the British budget, and the Tories have also "ring-fenced" aid to developing countries—to show that they are as sympathetic to the plight of the world's poor as Bono, who visited the conference via video. Unfortunately, British aid also goes to China, with which Britain has so far been unable to compete in many product markets.

To further embellish their image as a party with a heart as well as wallets and brains (Tory bigs Oliver Letwin, David Willetts, and Michael Gove are included on anyone's list of high IQ talents, although only Gove makes the list of future PMs), the Tories are leading the attack on greedy bankers, and promising to use the tax code to wrest from them any undue profits.

So there you have it: a modern, One Nation Tory party, preparing to lead the nation back from the financial brink to which Gordon Brown's policies have brought it, and to restore civility and safety to British life. Britain is broke and broken, and the Tories aim to fix it.

But they do not aim to restore its influence. Yes, Cameron is already angling for a White House meeting with Obama, who has given Brown what can only be described as short shrift, so that he can seem to have influence with America and try to coordinate Britain's Afghan policy with that of the United States. But like Brown, he is unprepared to increase spending on the military to much more than 2-3 percent of GDP, inadequate to meet current commitments much less maintain a properly equipped, consequential force in Afghanistan. So I am told by people at the highest level of the Tory party who know about spending plans, and top military staff who know how little they will be able to do with the available funds. Cameron wants to honor his troops, but sees them not as nation-builders ("We are not in Afghanistan to deliver the perfect society") but as trainers of Afghans so that they can prevent the reestablishment of terrorist training camps. "Then we can bring our troops home."

There is, of course, the small matter of an election. No one believes Labour can win—Brown is simply too unpopular. He has made one final throw of the dice by agreeing to three presidential-style debates with Cameron and with the leader of the Liberal Democrats, Nick Clegg. Brown hopes that his knowledge of economics, and the Keynesian steps he has taken to prevent the recession from worsening, will contrast nicely with Cameron's less sure grasp of fiscal and monetary policy. Cameron is betting that his persona and style will contrast nicely with Brown, described by his predecessor Tony Blair as a "big clunking fist," and recently seen to storm off a television interview because he was asked if he is on tranquilizers. Clegg is just hoping someone will notice him.

One thing is certain: No matter who wins the election, the days of an expanding welfare state are over, temporarily in the unlikely event of a Labour victory, permanently if the Tories win and carry out their plan to reduce the role of the state in the lives of British citizens. Brown and Cameron seem to have coherent but very different views of the relationship between the state and the individual. Brown believes in a strong, central state that should set detailed targets for doctors, cops, teachers—and tell them how to meet those targets. He also believes that the state has a legitimate claim on about half of all the wealth produced by its citizens, and should use that money to expand the welfare state. Cameron believes in devolving responsibility to families and individuals, allowing schools to develop different programs for the brightest and for those most in need of help, and most of all in restoring the sense of personal responsibility that he believes an overweening state has sapped. At last: an election about social values, economic policy, and the relationship of citizens to their state. Worth watching. ♦

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The White House Chickens Out

No meeting with the Dalai Lama—China might object. BY ELLEN BORK

The Dalai Lama, the exiled leader of Tibet, was in Washington last week and President Obama did not meet him. "Big mistake," said my Eritrean taxi driver on the way over to hear the Dalai Lama speak at an awards ceremony at Sidney Harman Hall on Wednesday.

What seemed so obvious to my driver was the product of an elaborate rationalization by the Obama administration. Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg outlined the new policy of "strategic reassurance" in a speech on September 24. The United States, he said, has struck a "core, if tacit, bargain" with China under which it will "welcome China's arrival as a prosperous and successful power" and China will "reassure" the world that its "development and growing global role will not come at the expense of the security and well-being of others." According to Steinberg, "bolstering that bargain"—which apparently includes snubbing the Dalai Lama—is a "priority."

The Dalai Lama after receiving the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize

ASSOCIATED PRESS / INGE GJELLESVIK

Rarely does a presidential meeting—or the lack of one—carry so much significance. In his spiritual role, the Dalai Lama has provided solace to those living inside Tibet under conditions of growing repression, militarization, and environmental degradation. Under his leadership, Tibetans in exile have established democratic institutions, including a parliament elected by the Tibetan diaspora, and turned over political functions to a prime minister. "I believe that future generations will consider these changes among the most important achievements of our experience in exile," the Dalai Lama has said.

Chinese Communist authorities fear such developments and the impact they have on Chinese citizens. At Wednesday's event, the Chinese writer Wang Lixiong accepted an award from the International Campaign for Tibet on behalf of some 300 Chinese intellectuals and activists who signed "Twelve Suggestions for Dealing with the Tibetan Situation," in response to the demonstrations of 2008 in Tibet and the mass arrests and trials with which they were met. The mostly ethnic Chinese signers of the document criticized official vilification of the Dalai Lama ("an evil spirit with a human face and the heart of a beast") as reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution and called for dialogue between the People's Republic of China and the Dalai Lama and reconciliation between Tibetans and Chinese.

"Our position," Wang said, "did not arise from choosing camps, it arose from a pursuit of the truth. . . . The fake propaganda and information blackout by the totalitarian power has made it difficult for the majority of the Chinese people to understand the truth about Tibet, and they have no way of knowing" that the Dalai Lama seeks rights and freedoms under Chinese rule, not independence. "Removing this obstacle [to solving the Tibet Question] should be the mission of China's intellectuals, for there is no greater knowledge than the truth."

The implications of this truth are enormous for China. "The racial hatred created by totalitarianism has perversely become a reason used by the totalitarians to reject democracy," Wang said. "This logic of kidnapper and hostage living or dying together is a difficult obstacle to remove along the path to democracy."

By effectively weakening the Dalai Lama, President Obama also weakens Wang and his colleagues and their mission. In the past, only pressure on China has brought results, such as renewed contacts between the Dalai Lama and representatives of the PRC in the late 1990s. President Obama's refusal to meet the Dalai Lama gives cover to other countries—most recently Australia—to succumb to pressure from China, increasing the isolation of the Tibetan leader. In the meantime, Chinese Communist rulers are making plans for the future, hoping to control the selection of the next Dalai Lama, drafting new "guidelines for reincarnation."

On Wednesday, the actor and Tibet supporter Richard Gere called on President Obama to exhibit the same "courage and wisdom" as the Chinese honored at the ceremony. The president can do so by scheduling a meeting with the Dalai Lama, as all his predecessors since George H.W. Bush did. On his upcoming trip to China in late November, the president should speak against Communist propaganda vilifying the Dalai Lama as an 'evil splitist.' Finally, the president should make it a condition of his visit that he be permitted to meet with Wang Lixiong, his wife Woeser—a persecuted Tibetan author—and other signers of the document, including the jailed Liu Xiaobo. This bolstering of individuals who risk so much for democracy and racial tolerance should be President Obama's priority. ♦

Ellen Bork is director for democracy and human rights at the Foreign Policy Initiative.

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Decline Is a Choice

The New Liberalism and the end of American ascendancy

By Charles Krauthammer

The weathervanes of conventional wisdom are registering another round of angst about America in decline. New theories, old slogans: Imperial overstretch. The Asian awakening. The post-American world. Inexorable forces beyond our control bringing the inevitable humbling of the world hegemon.

On the other side of this debate are a few—notably Josef Joffe in a recent essay in *Foreign Affairs*—who resist the current fashion and insist that America remains the indispensable power. They note that declinist predictions are cyclical, that the rise of China (and perhaps India) are just the current version of the Japan panic of the late 1980s or of the earlier pessimism best captured by Jean-François Revel's *How Democracies Perish*.

The anti-declinists point out, for example, that the fear of China is overblown. It's based on the implausible assumption of indefinite, uninterrupted growth; ignores accumulating externalities like pollution (which can be ignored when growth starts from a very low baseline, but ends up making growth increasingly, chokingly difficult); and overlooks the unavoidable consequences of the one-child policy, which guarantees that China will get old before it gets rich.

And just as the rise of China is a straight-line projection of current economic trends, American decline is a straight-line projection of the fearful, pessimistic mood of a country war-weary and in the grip of a severe recession.

Among these crosscurrents, my thesis is simple: The question of whether America is in decline cannot be answered yes or no. There *is* no yes or no. Both answers are wrong, because the assumption that somehow there exists some predetermined inevitable trajectory, the result of uncontrollable external forces, is wrong. Nothing is inevitable. Nothing is written. For America today, decline is not a condition. Decline is a choice. Two decades into the unipolar world that came about with the fall of the Soviet Union, America is in the position of deciding whether to abdicate or retain its dominance. Decline—or continued ascendancy—is in our hands.

> Obama indicted his own country for arrogance, for dismissiveness and derisiveness (toward Europe), for maltreatment of natives, for torture, for Hiroshima, for Guantánamo, for unilateralism.

Not that decline is *always* a choice. Britain's decline after World War II *was* foretold, as indeed was that of Europe, which had been the dominant global force of the preceding centuries. The civilizational suicide that was the two world wars, and the consequent physical and psychological exhaustion, made continued dominance impossible and decline inevitable.

The corollary to unchosen European collapse was unchosen American ascendancy. We—whom Lincoln once called God's "almost chosen people"—did not save Europe twice *in order* to emerge from the ashes as the world's co-hegemon. We went in to defend ourselves and save civilization. Our dominance after World War II was not sought. Nor was the even more remarkable dominance after the Soviet collapse. We are the rarest of geopolitical phenomena: the accidental hegemon and, given our history of isolationism and lack of

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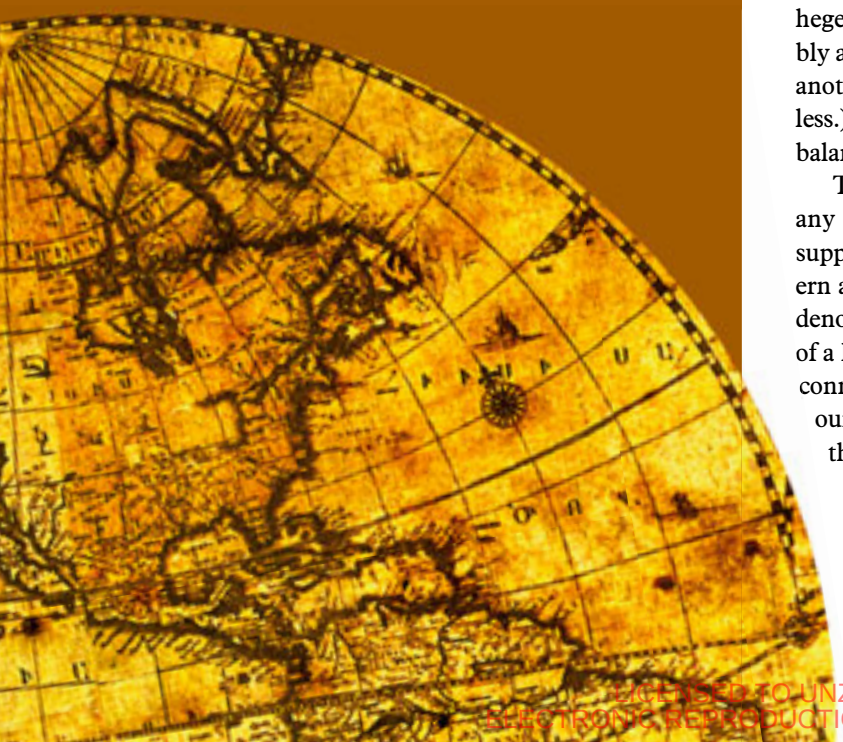
instinctive imperial ambition, the reluctant hegemon—and now, after a near-decade of strenuous post-9/11 exertion, more reluctant than ever.

Which leads to my second proposition: Facing the choice of whether to maintain our dominance or to gradually, deliberately, willingly, and indeed relievedly give it up, we are currently on a course towards the latter. The current liberal ascendancy in the United States—controlling the executive and both houses of Congress, dominating the media and elite culture—has set us on a course for decline. And this is true for both foreign and domestic policies. Indeed, they work synergistically to ensure that outcome.

Obama said to the General Assembly, 'No one nation can or should try to dominate another nation.' (The 'can' in that declaration is priceless.) And if hegemony is out, so is balance of power: 'No balance of power among nations will hold.'



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The current foreign policy of the United States is an exercise in contraction. It begins with the demolition of the moral foundation of American dominance. In Strasbourg, President Obama was asked about American exceptionalism. His answer? "I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism." Interesting response. Because if everyone is exceptional, no one is.

Indeed, as he made his *hajj* from Strasbourg to Prague to Ankara to Istanbul to Cairo and finally to the U.N. General Assembly, Obama drew the picture of an America quite exceptional—exceptional in moral culpability and heavy-handedness, exceptional in guilt for its treatment of other nations and peoples. With varying degrees of directness or obliqueness, Obama indicted his own country for arrogance, for dismissiveness and derisiveness (toward Europe), for maltreatment of natives, for torture, for Hiroshima, for Guantánamo, for unilateralism, and for insufficient respect for the Muslim world.

Quite an indictment, the fundamental consequence of which is to effectively undermine any moral claim that America might have to world leadership, as well as the moral confidence that any nation needs to have in order to justify to itself and to others its position of leadership. According to the new dispensation, having forfeited the mandate of heaven—if it ever had one—a newly humbled America now seeks a more modest place among the nations, not above them.

But that leads to the question: How does this new world govern itself? How is the international system to function?

Henry Kissinger once said that the only way to achieve peace is through hegemony or balance of power. Well, hegemony is out. As Obama said in his General Assembly address, "No one nation can or should try to dominate another nation." (The "can" in that declaration is priceless.) And if hegemony is out, so is balance of power: "No balance of power among nations will hold."

The president then denounced the idea of elevating any group of nations above others—which takes care, I suppose, of the Security Council, the G-20, and the Western alliance. And just to make the point unmistakable, he denounced "alignments of nations rooted in the cleavages of a long-gone Cold War" as making "no sense in an interconnected world." What does that say about NATO? Of our alliances with Japan and South Korea? Or even of the European Union?

This is nonsense. But it is not harmless nonsense. It's nonsense with a point. It reflects a fundamental view that the only legitimate authority in the international system is that which emanates from "the

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community of nations" as a whole. Which means, I suppose, acting through its most universal organs such as, again I suppose, the U.N. and its various agencies. Which is why when Obama said that those who doubt "the character and cause" of his own country should see what this new America—the America of the liberal ascendancy—had done in the last nine months, he listed among these restorative and relegitimizing initiatives paying up U.N. dues, renewing actions on various wholly vacuous universalist declarations and agreements, and joining such Orwellian U.N. bodies as the Human Rights Council.

These gestures have not gone unnoticed abroad. The Nobel Committee effused about Obama's radical reorientation of U.S. foreign policy. Its citation awarding him the Nobel Peace Prize lauded him for having "created a new climate" in international relations in which "multilateral diplomacy has regained a central position, with emphasis on the role that the United Nations and other institutions can play."

Of course, the idea of the "international community" acting through the U.N.—a fiction and a farce respectively—to enforce norms and maintain stability is absurd. So absurd that I suspect it's really just a metaphor for a world run by a kind of multipolar arrangement not of nation-states but of groups of states acting through multilateral bodies, whether institutional (like the International Atomic Energy Agency) or ad hoc (like the P5+1 Iran negotiators).

But whatever bizarre form of multilateral or universal structures is envisioned for keeping world order, certainly hegemony—and specifically American hegemony—is to be retired.

This renunciation of primacy is not entirely new. Liberal internationalism as practiced by the center-left Clinton administrations of the 1990s—the beginning of the unipolar era—was somewhat ambivalent about American hegemony, although it did allow America to be characterized as "the indispensable nation," to use Madeleine Albright's phrase. Clintonian center-left liberal internationalism did seek to restrain American power by tying Gulliver down with a myriad of treaties and agreements and international conventions. That conscious constraining of America within international bureaucratic and normative structures was rooted in the notion that power corrupts and that external restraints would curb arrogance and overreaching and break a willful America to the role of good international citizen.

But the liberal internationalism of today is different. It is not center-left, but left-liberal. And the new left-liberal internationalism goes far beyond its earlier Clintonian incarnation in its distrust of and distaste for American dominance. For what might be called the New Liberalism, the renunciation of power is rooted not in the fear that we are essentially good but subject to the corruptions of power—the old Clintonian view—but rooted in the conviction that America is so intrinsically flawed, so inherently and congenitally sinful that it cannot be trusted with, and does not merit, the possession of overarching world power.

For the New Liberalism, it is not just that power corrupts. It is that America itself is corrupt—in the sense of being deeply flawed, and with the history to prove it. An imperfect union, the theme of Obama's famous Philadelphia race speech, has been carried to and amplified in his every major foreign-policy address, particularly those delivered on foreign soil. (Not surprisingly, since it earns greater applause over there.)

And because we remain so imperfect a nation, we are in no position to dictate our professed values to others around the world. Demonstrators are shot in the streets of Tehran seeking nothing but freedom, but our president holds his tongue because, he says openly, of our own alleged transgressions towards Iran (presumably involvement in the 1953 coup). Our shortcomings are so grave, and our offenses both domestic and international so serious, that we lack the moral ground on which to justify hegemony.

These fundamental tenets of the New Liberalism are not just theory. They have strategic consequences. If we have been illegitimately playing the role of world hegemon, then for us to regain a legitimate place in the international system we must regain our moral authority. And recovering moral space means renouncing ill-gotten or ill-conceived strategic space.

Operationally, this manifests itself in various kinds of strategic retreat, most particularly in reversing policies stained by even the hint of American unilateralism or exceptionalism. Thus, for example, there is no more "Global War on Terror." It's not just that the term has been abolished or that the secretary of homeland security refers to terrorism as "man-caused disasters." It is that the very idea of our nation and civilization being engaged in a global mortal struggle with jihadism has been retired as well.

The operational consequences of that new view are already manifest. In our reversion to pre-9/11 normalcy—the pretense of pre-9/11 normalcy—antiterrorism has reverted from war fighting to law enforcement. High-level al Qaeda prisoners, for example, will henceforth be interrogated not by the CIA but by the FBI, just as our response to the attack on the USS *Cole* pre-9/11—an act of war—was to send FBI agents to Yemen.

The operational consequences of voluntary contraction are already evident:

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■ Unilateral abrogation of our missile-defense arrangements with Poland and the Czech Republic—a retreat being felt all through Eastern Europe to Ukraine and Georgia as a signal of U.S. concession of strategic space to Russia in its old sphere of influence.

■ Indecision on Afghanistan—a widely expressed ambivalence about the mission and a serious contemplation of minimalist strategies that our commanders on the ground have reported to the president have no chance of success. In short, a serious contemplation of strategic retreat in Afghanistan (only two months ago it was declared by the president to be a "war of necessity") with possibly catastrophic consequences for Pakistan.

■ In Iraq, a determination to end the war according to rigid timetables, with almost no interest in garnering the fruits of a very costly and very bloody success—namely, using our Strategic Framework Agreement to turn the new Iraq into a strategic partner and anchor for U.S. influence in the most volatile area of the world. Iraq is a prize—we can debate endlessly whether it was worth the cost—of great strategic significance that the administration seems to have no intention of exploiting in its determination to execute a full and final exit.

■ In Honduras, where again because of our allegedly sinful imperial history, we back a Chávista caudillo seeking illegal extension of his presidency who was removed from power by the legitimate organs of state—from the supreme court to the national congress—for grave constitutional violations.

The New Liberalism will protest that despite its rhetoric, it is not engaging in moral reparations, but seeking real strategic advantage for the United States on the assumption that the reason we have not gotten cooperation from, say, the Russians, Iranians, North Koreans, or even our European allies on various urgent agendas is American arrogance, unilateralism, and dismissiveness. And therefore, if we constrict and rebrand and diminish ourselves deliberately—try to make ourselves equal partners with obviously unequal powers abroad—we will gain the moral high ground and rally the world to our causes.

Well, being a strategic argument, the hypothesis is testable. Let's tally up the empirical evidence of what nine months of self-abasement has brought.

With all the bowing and scraping and apologizing and renouncing, we couldn't even sway the International Olympic Committee. Given the humiliation incurred there in pursuit of a trinket, it is no surprise how little our new international posture has yielded in the coin of real strategic goods. Unilateral American concessions and offers of unconditional engagement have moved neither Iran nor Russia nor North Korea to accommodate us. Nor have the Arab states—or even the powerless Palestinian Authority—offered so much as a gesture of accommodation in response to heavy and gratuitous American pressure on Israel. Nor have even our European allies responded: They have anted up essentially nothing in response to our pleas for more assistance in Afghanistan.

The very expectation that these concessions would yield results is puzzling. Thus, for example, the president is proposing radical reductions in nuclear weapons and presided over a Security Council meeting passing a resolution whose goal is universal nuclear disarmament, on the theory that unless the existing nuclear powers reduce their weaponry, they can never have the moral standing to demand that other states not go nuclear.

But whatever the merits of unilateral or even bilateral U.S.-Russian disarmament, the notion that it will lead to reciprocal gestures from the likes of Iran and North Korea is simply childish. They are seeking the bomb for reasons of power, prestige, intimidation, blackmail, and regime preservation. They don't give a whit about the level of nuclear arms among the great powers. Indeed, both Iran and North Korea launched their nuclear weapons ambitions in the 1980s and the 1990s—precisely when the United States and Russia were radically reducing their arsenals.

This deliberate choice of strategic retreats to engender good feeling is based on the naïve hope of exchanges of reciprocal goodwill with rogue states. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the theory—as policy—has demonstrably produced no strategic advances. But that will not deter the New Liberalism because the ultimate purpose of its foreign policy is to make America less hegemonic, less arrogant, less dominant.

In a word, it is a foreign policy designed to produce American decline—to make America essentially one nation among many. And for that purpose, its domestic policies are perfectly complementary.

Domestic policy, of course, is not *designed* to curb our power abroad. But what it lacks in intent, it makes up in effect. Decline will be an unintended, but powerful, side effect of the New Liberalism's ambition of moving America from its traditional dynamic individualism to the more equitable but static model of European social democracy.

This is not the place to debate the intrinsic merits of the social democratic versus the Anglo-Saxon model of capitalism. There's much to be said for the decency and relative equity of social democracy. But it comes at a cost: diminished social mobility, higher unemployment, less innovation, less dynamism and creative destruction, less overall economic growth.

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This affects the ability to project power. Growth provides the sinews of dominance—the ability to maintain a large military establishment capable of projecting power to all corners of the earth. The Europeans, rich and developed, have almost no such capacity. They made the choice long ago to devote their resources to a vast welfare state. Their expenditures on defense are minimal, as are their consequent military capacities. They rely on the U.S. Navy for open seas and on the U.S. Air Force for airlift. It's the U.S. Marines who go ashore, not just in battle, but for such global social services as tsunami relief. The United States can do all of this because we spend infinitely more on defense—more than the next nine countries combined.

Those are the conditions today. But they are not static or permanent. They require constant renewal. The express agenda of the New Liberalism is a vast expansion of social services—massive intervention and expenditures in energy, health care, and education—that will necessarily, as in Europe, take away from defense spending.

This shift in resources is not hypothetical. It has already begun. At a time when hundreds of billions of dollars are being lavished on stimulus and other appropriations in an endless array of domestic programs, the defense budget is practically frozen. Almost every other department is expanding, and the Defense Department is singled out for making "hard choices"—forced to look everywhere for cuts, to abandon highly advanced weapons systems, to choose between readiness and research, between today's urgencies and tomorrow's looming threats.

Take, for example, missile defense, in which the United States has a great technological edge and one perfectly designed to maintain American preeminence in a century that will be dominated by the ballistic missile. Missile defense is actually being cut. The number of interceptors in Alaska to defend against a North Korean attack has been reduced, and the airborne laser program (the most promising technology for a boost-phase anti-ballistic missile) has been cut back—at the same time that the federal education budget has been increased 100 percent in one year.

This preference for social goods over security needs is not just evident in budgetary allocations and priorities. It is seen, for example, in the liberal preference for environmental goods. By prohibiting the drilling of offshore and Arctic deposits, the United States is voluntarily denying itself access to vast amounts of oil that would relieve dependency on—and help curb the wealth and power of—various petrodollar challengers, from Iran to Venezuela to Russia. Again, we can argue whether the environment versus security trade-off is warranted. But there is no denying that there is a trade-off.

Nor are these the only trade-offs. Primacy in space—a galvanizing symbol of American greatness, so deeply understood and openly championed by John Kennedy—is gradually being relinquished. In the current reconsideration of all things Bush, the idea of returning to the

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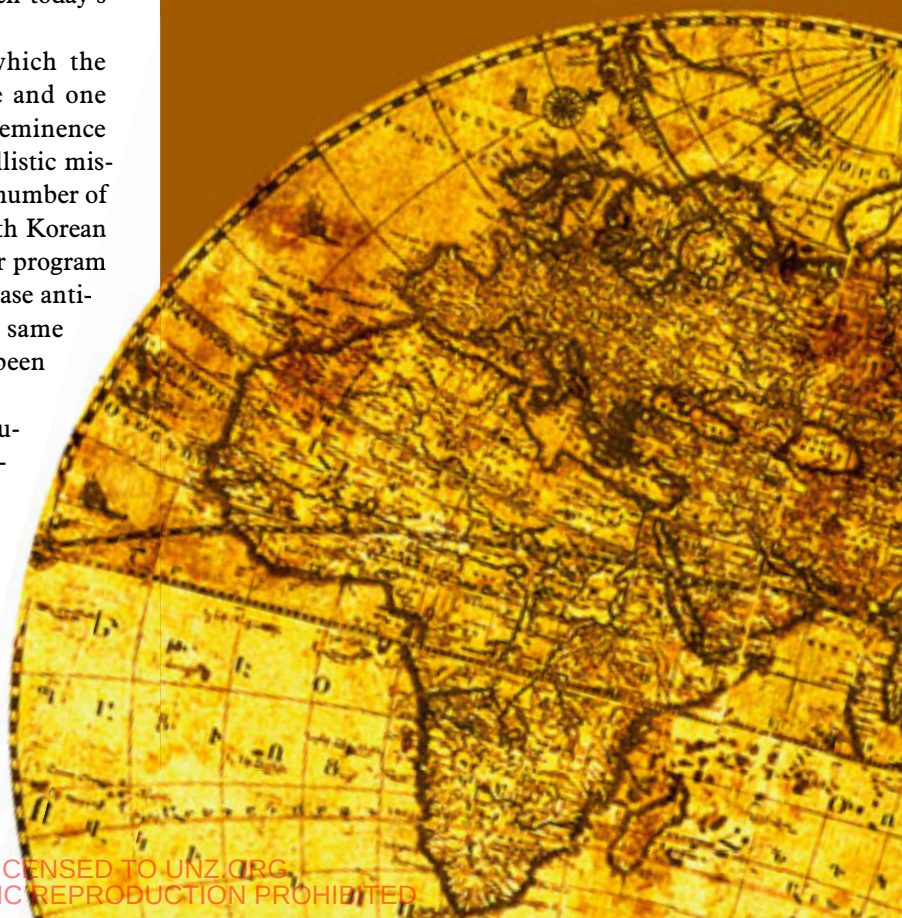

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moon in the next decade is being jettisoned. After next September, the space shuttle will never fly again, and its replacement is being reconsidered and delayed. That will leave the United States totally incapable of returning even to near-Earth orbit, let alone to the moon. Instead, for years to come, we shall be entirely dependent on the Russians, or perhaps eventually even the Chinese.

Of symbolic but also more concrete importance is the status of the dollar. The social democratic vision necessarily involves huge increases in domestic expenditures, most immediately for expanded health care. The plans currently under consideration will cost in the range of $1 trillion. And once the budget gimmicks are discounted (such as promises of $500 billion cuts in Medicare which will never eventuate), that means hundreds of billions of dollars *added* to the monstrous budgetary deficits that the Congressional Budget Office projects conservatively at $7 trillion over the next decade.

The effect on the dollar is already being felt and could ultimately lead to a catastrophic collapse and/or hyperinflation. Having control of the world's reserve currency is an irreplaceable national asset. Yet with every new and growing estimate of the explosion of the national debt, there are more voices calling for replacement of the dollar as the world currency—not just adversaries like Russia and China, Iran and Venezuela, which one would expect, but just last month the head of the World Bank.

There is no free lunch. Social democracy and its attendant goods may be highly desirable, but they have their price—a price that will be exacted on the dollar, on our primacy in space, on missile defense, on energy security, and on our military capacities and future power projection.

But, of course, if one's foreign policy is to reject the very notion of international primacy in the first place, a domestic agenda that takes away the resources to maintain such primacy is perfectly complementary. Indeed, the two are synergistic. Renunciation of primacy abroad provides the added resources for more social goods at home. To put it in the language of the 1990s, the expanded domestic agenda is fed by a peace dividend—except that in the absence of peace, it is a *retreat* dividend.

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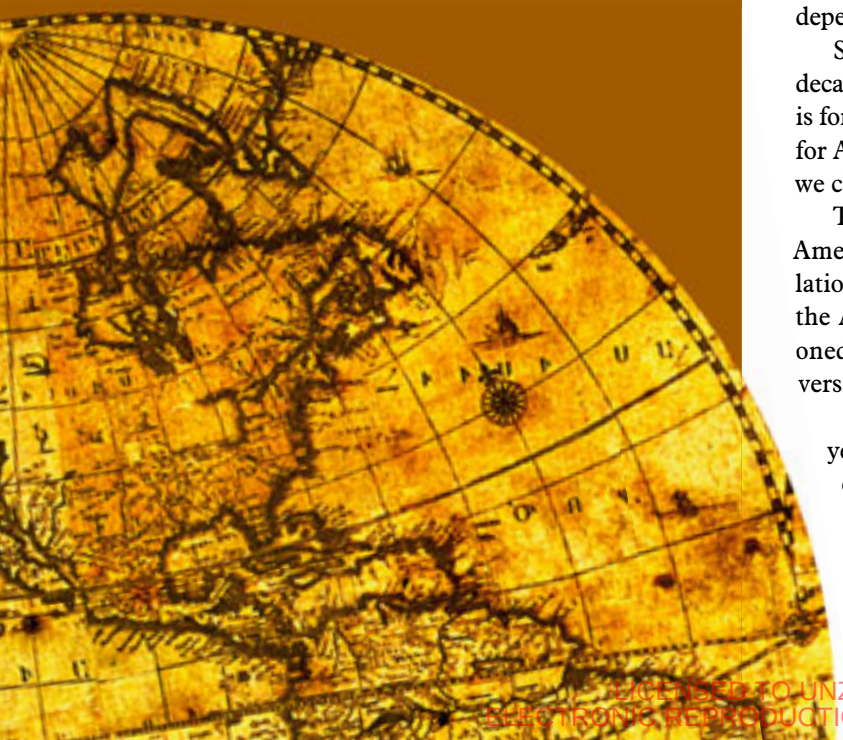

And there's the rub. For the Europeans there really is a peace dividend, because we provide the peace. They can afford social democracy without the capacity to defend themselves because they can always depend on the United States.

So why not us as well? Because what for Europe is decadence—decline, in both comfort and relative safety—is for us mere denial. Europe can eat, drink, and be merry for America protects her. But for America it's different. If we choose the life of ease, who stands guard for us?

The temptation to abdicate has always been strong in America. Our interventionist tradition is recent. Our isolationist tradition goes far deeper. Nor is it restricted to the American left. Historically, of course, it was championed by the American right until the Vandenberg conversion. And it remains a bipartisan instinct.

When the era of maximum dominance began 20 years ago—when to general surprise a unipolar world emerged rather than a post-Cold War multipolar one—there was hesitation about accepting the mantle. And it wasn't just among liberals. In the fall of 1990, Jeane Kirkpatrick, heroine in the struggle to

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defeat the Soviet Union, argued that, after a half-century of exertion fighting fascism, Nazism, and communism, "it is time to give up the dubious benefits of superpower status," time to give up the "unusual burdens" of the past and "return to 'normal' times." No more balancing power in Europe or in Asia. We should aspire instead to be "a normal country in a normal time."

That call to retreat was rejected by most of American conservatism (as Pat Buchanan has amply demonstrated by his very marginality). But it did find some resonance in mainstream liberalism. At first, however, only *some* resonance. As noted earlier, the liberal internationalism of the 1990s, the center-left Clintonian version, was reluctant to fully embrace American hegemony and did try to rein it in by creating external restraints. Nonetheless, in practice, it did boldly intervene in the Balkan wars (without the sanction of the Security Council, mind you) and openly accepted a kind of intermediate status as "the indispensable nation."

Not today. The ascendant New Liberalism goes much further, actively seeking to subsume America within the international community—*inter pares*, not even *primus*—and to enact a domestic social agenda to suit.

So why not? Why not choose ease and bask in the adulation of the world as we serially renounce, withdraw, and concede?

Because, while globalization has produced in some the illusion that human nature has changed, it has not. The international arena remains a Hobbesian state of nature in which countries naturally strive for power. If we voluntarily renounce much of ours, others will not follow suit. They will fill the vacuum. Inevitably, an inversion of power relations will occur.

Do we really want to live under unknown, untested, shifting multipolarity? Or even worse, under the gauzy internationalism of the New Liberalism with its magically self-enforcing norms? This is sometimes passed off as "realism." In fact, it is the worst of utopianisms, a fiction that can lead only to chaos. Indeed, in an age on the threshold of hyper-proliferation, it is a prescription for catastrophe.

Heavy are the burdens of the hegemon. After the blood and treasure expended in the post-9/11 wars, America is quite ready to ease its burden with a gentle descent into abdication and decline.

Decline is a choice. More than a choice, a temptation. How to resist it?

First, accept our role as hegemon. And reject those who deny its essential benignity. There is a reason that we are the only hegemon in modern history to have not immediately catalyzed the creation of a massive counter-hegemonic alliance—as occurred, for example, against Napoleonic France and Nazi Germany. There is a reason so many countries of the Pacific Rim and the Middle East and Eastern Europe and Latin America welcome our presence as balancer of power and guarantor of their freedom.

And that reason is simple: We are as benign a hegemon as the world has ever seen.

So, resistance to decline begins with moral self-confidence and will. But maintaining dominance is a matter not just of will but of wallet. We are not inherently in economic decline. We have the most dynamic, innovative, technologically advanced economy in the world. We enjoy the highest productivity. It is true that in the natural and often painful global division of labor wrought by globalization, less skilled endeavors like factory work migrate abroad, but America more than compensates by pioneering the newer technologies and industries of the information age.

There are, of course, major threats to the American economy. But there is nothing inevitable and inexorable about them. Take, for example, the threat to the dollar (as the world's reserve currency) that comes from our massive trade deficits. Here again, the China threat is vastly exaggerated. In fact, fully two-thirds of our trade imbalance comes from imported oil. This is not a fixed fact of life. We have a choice. We have it in our power, for example, to reverse the absurd de facto 30-year ban on new nuclear power plants. We have it in our power to release huge domestic petroleum reserves by dropping the ban on offshore and Arctic drilling. We have it in our power to institute a serious gasoline tax (refunded immediately through a payroll tax reduction) to curb consumption and induce conservation.

Nothing is written. Nothing is predetermined. We can reverse the slide, we can undo dependence if we will it.

The other looming threat to our economy—and to the dollar—comes from our fiscal deficits. They are not out of our control. There is no reason we should be structurally perpetuating the massive deficits incurred as temporary crisis measures during the financial panic of 2008. A crisis is a terrible thing to exploit when it is taken by the New Liberalism as a mandate for massive expansion of the state and of national debt—threatening the dollar, the entire economy, and consequently our superpower status abroad.

There are things to be done. Resist retreat as a matter of strategy and principle. And provide the means to continue our dominant role in the world by keeping our economic house in order. And finally, we can follow the advice of Demosthenes when asked what was to be done about the decline of Athens. His reply? "I will give what I believe is the fairest and truest answer: Don't do what you are doing now." ♦

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Creighton Abrams congratulating a Vietnamese soldier for his actions in repeling a Viet Cong attack

The Incurable Vietnam Syndrome

Distorting our foreign policy for three decades and counting

By Max Boot

President George H.W. Bush thought that after the victory in the Gulf war we had "kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all." How wrong he was.

The syndrome was on full display during the 1990s, when pundits and politicos rushed to compare American interventions in Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo, which resulted in no American casualties, to the worst military defeat in our history. Announced a military analyst in the *Los Angeles Times* on June 3, 1995: "If you liked Dien Bien Phu, you'll love Sarajevo—this policy is nuts." The analogy industry really hit overdrive in 2003 with the invasion of Iraq. "Echoes of Vietnam Grow Louder," a *Newsweek* headline ominously proclaimed on October 29, 2003. The next month, a *New York Times* article began, "'Quagmire,' 'attrition,' 'credibility gap,' 'Iraqification'—a listener to the debate over the situation in Iraq might think that it truly is Vietnam all over again." Howard Dean certainly thought so. He told Dan Rather, "We sent troops to Vietnam, without understanding why we were there … and it was a disaster. And Iraq is gonna become a disaster under this presidency."

Iraq was difficult, but hardly an irretrievable disaster and certainly not a Vietnam-size disaster. After six and a

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half years of war, the United States has lost over 4,300 service personnel in Iraq—a sobering and substantial figure but still 13 times fewer fatalities than we suffered in Vietnam. Just as important, all indications in Iraq are that we are winning.

But, rest assured, a history of being consistently wrong has not deterred all those Boomers who came of age in the 1960s from once again evoking the specter of you-know-what to warn against involvement in Afghanistan. Actually the "Afghanistan as Vietnam" meme is hardly new. The late R.W. Apple Jr. of the *New York Times* notoriously wrote a front-page article with that very headline on October 31, 2001. In portentous *Times*-speak, Apple wondered:

> Could Afghanistan become another Vietnam? Is the United States facing another stalemate on the other side of the world? Premature the questions may be, three weeks after the fighting began. Unreasonable they are not, given the scars scoured into the national psyche by defeat in Southeast Asia.

He was right about one thing: The questions were premature. A few weeks later the Taliban government was toppled. Thereafter we were spared "Afghanistan as Vietnam" tropes until the comparison returned with a vengeance amid the Taliban's gains this year. *Newsweek* kicked things off with a cover article on February 1 on "Obama's Vietnam." More recently, retired general and erstwhile presidential contender Wesley Clark wrote in an op-ed in the *New York Daily News*, "The similarities to Vietnam are ominous." Senator John Kerry, who seems to mention Vietnam in every other breath (did he have some connection to the conflict, one wonders?), proclaimed on October 1, "The fact is that we've been through this before. You know, in Vietnam, we heard the commanding general on the ground saying we need more troops. We heard the president of the United States say if we just put in more troops, we're going to see the light at the end of the tunnel."

Barack Obama, however, hasn't been saying anything about light at the end of the tunnel. The president, who (mercifully) came of age after the Vietnam war, seemingly put the kibosh on these mindless comparisons on September 15 when he said, in response to a question, "You never step into the same river twice. And so Afghanistan is not Vietnam." Yet the evocation of Vietnam keeps cropping up among the president's aides and supporters, who warn, as E.J. Dionne did in an October 5 *Washington Post* column, that involvement in Afghanistan could harm the president's domestic agenda as badly as the Vietnam war harmed LBJ's Great Society. It has been widely reported that the "must read" book in the White House now is *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam* by Gordon Goldstein, a study of the Kennedy-Johnson national security adviser and his role in the war. And a *Times* of London correspondent wrote on September 24 that "one senior official" in the White House, while speaking to him, "introduced the word 'Vietnam' into a discussion of Afghanistan."

Far be it from me—a military historian—to dispute the usefulness of history in policymaking. Properly applied, the study of past wars can be essential in guiding the course of current and future conflicts. But the key is to take lessons selectively and intelligently and not become enthralled by lazy reasoning along the lines of "Vietnam was an American war; X is an American war; therefore, X will be another Vietnam."

The Vietnam conflict featured a variety of factors that are absent in Afghanistan and Iraq. North Vietnam was a disciplined, one-party state with one of the world's largest and most battle-hardened armies. It had the legitimacy that came from a struggle against French colonialism and the support of two superpowers, China and Russia. Almost all of its resources from 1954 to 1975 were devoted to one goal—the annexation of South Vietnam. Given such a formidable foe, which was able to confront us not only with black-clad guerrillas but also with regulars riding tanks, the U.S. defeat becomes more explicable and less replicable.

The Iraqi guerrillas, Sunni and Shiite, were formidable in their own right, but they were no Viet Cong. Neither are the Taliban. They are more likely to engage in sustained firefights than were Al Qaeda in Iraq or the Mahdi Army, but they are incapable of maneuvering in battalion-, brigade-, or division-sized formations as the Vietnamese Communists routinely did. Even company-sized attacks are rare in Afghanistan. The Taliban, like their Iraqi counterparts, prefer to strike with IEDs, which take little courage to plant. Although the Taliban, like the Viet Cong, enjoy cross-border havens, they do not receive anywhere close to the same degree of support from Pakistan that the Viet Cong got from North Vietnam. They don't even receive as much outside support as the mujahedeen did during their 1980s war against the Soviet Army in Afghanistan. Nor are they monolithic, as the Viet Cong were. The very term "Taliban" is a misnomer. It is used to describe loosely affiliated bands of insurgents who have no unified command structure of the kind that Hanoi imposed on its forces. Thus there is little danger of coordinated, countrywide attacks like the 1968 Tet Offensive. None of the Afghan insurgent groups enjoys anywhere close to the prestige and legitimacy, either at home or abroad, that the Viet Cong were able to garner in their fight against first France and then the United States. Mullah Omar is no Ho Chi Minh. Neither is Jalaluddin Haqqani.

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Are there nevertheless lessons from Vietnam that will help us fight the Taliban and other present-day foes? Undoubtedly. But the right lesson to draw is not that "we can't win." In fact, in Vietnam between 1968 and 1972 we did more or less win (a point elaborated by historian Lewis Sorley in his 1999 book *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*), but we failed to stick it out. If the United States had continued supporting Saigon with substantial aid after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1973 to counter the aid Moscow and Beijing were providing to Hanoi, the likelihood is that South Vietnam would still exist—just as South Korea still exists.

The Vietnam experience demonstrates the importance of using sound counterinsurgency tactics based on protecting the population rather than the conventional "search and destroy" methods employed in the early years of that war, which resulted in massive casualties for both sides (as well as for civilians) and ultimately squandered America's commitment to continue the fight. Somewhat in the mold of General Creighton Abrams, who took command in Vietnam in 1968, General Stanley McChrystal has inherited a conventional war effort that he is determined to convert into a population-centric counterinsurgency effort. The difference is that the Afghan National Army and the International Security Assistance Force are far smaller and less capable than their Vietnam war counterparts, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam and Military Assistance Command-Vietnam. Therefore implementing a counterinsurgency strategy will require more troops. If the White House agrees, it will be imperative to send a substantial number of reinforcements quickly rather than repeating one of the mistakes of the Vietnam days when Lyndon Johnson escalated gradually. That allowed the enemy to adjust to American tactics and made it impossible to wrest the initiative on the battlefield.

If Obama decides not to make a serious and prolonged commitment to Afghanistan, he will be making the same mistake so many Democrats did in the early 1970s when they claimed that we could get out of Vietnam with no damage to our country or the region.

The Vietnam experience also shows the importance of not holding Third World allies to an impossible standard. The Kennedy administration helped overthrow Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963, and South Vietnam never had another ruler who was as strong or legitimate. That is a lesson worth keeping in mind as so many critics insist that progress in Afghanistan requires replacing Hamid Karzai, who is supposedly too discredited to help us win. *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich writes, for instance, that "Karzai, whose brother is a reputed narcotics trafficker, is a double for Ngo Dinh Diem." Let us hope he does not suffer Diem's fate. If the United States were to be seen as complicit in Karzai's removal, that would make it as difficult for his successors to gain legitimacy as it was for Diem's successors.

Another crucial point to take away from Vietnam is the importance of willpower in warfare. North Vietnam was much smaller than the United States, but its desire to prevail was much greater. If it is parallels to Vietnam that you seek, look at the wavering in the White House today. In some respects it is reminiscent of the Johnson and Nixon administrations, which showed themselves more interested in ending than in winning the war.

If President Obama ultimately decides not to make a serious and prolonged commitment to Afghanistan, he will be making the same mistake so many Democrats did in the early 1970s when they claimed that we could get out of Vietnam with no damage to our country or the region. We now know that America's defeat was a tragedy for the people of Southeast Asia, with millions of Cambodians slain in the "killing fields" and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese "boat people" taking to the seas on leaky rafts. It also did incalculable damage to America's standing in the world, encouraging our enemies from Tehran to Managua to step up attacks on our allies. It took us a full decade to recover, and even now we are still dealing with some of the fallout from that period, such as the Iranian revolution. The consequences of defeat in Afghanistan would undoubtedly be just as severe, if very different.

By and large, however, we would all be well advised to handle Vietnam analogies with great care and to focus on the specifics of current conflicts rather than making them fit a template that's more than three decades old. That is precisely what General McChrystal and his team of officers are doing. Their findings are based on a careful, on-the-ground review of the situation. Many of their critics, by contrast, seem to be driven by sixties nostalgia more than by an understanding of Afghanistan today. ♦

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President Alexander Kwasniewski welcoming George W. Bush to Poland, 2003

AP PHOTO / J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE

Standing Down

How popular should America want to be?

By Tod Lindberg

Perhaps President Obama's Nobel Peace Prize will spur a sudden global outpouring of love and affection for the United States, but the American Political Science Association (APSA) thinks our image problem runs deeper: Its 20-member blue chip task force (minus two dissenters) has concluded that U.S. standing in the world is in trouble. Chaired by Jeffrey Legro of the University of Virginia, the task force issued a report last month that traces broad declines in the willingness of people around the globe to express positive views of the United States, the willingness of governments to side with the United States, and the degree of satisfaction among Americans themselves with the U.S. position in the world. The report's findings will be depressing to anyone who would like the United States to be well-thought-of. What to do about that problem, however, is a question on which the report is not especially illuminating.

Eighty-three percent of Americans in a September 2008 Chicago Council poll ranked "improving America's standing in the world" as a "very important" goal of U.S. foreign policy. Standing was at the top of the chart, outpacing "protecting the jobs of American workers" and "securing adequate supplies of energy" (80 percent each) and "preventing the spread of nuclear weapons" (73 percent). (Dead last on the list was "helping to bring a democratic form of government to other nations," at 17 percent.)

Meanwhile, U.S. favorability ratings abroad dropped precipitously, especially in Europe, from 2002 forward. The percentage of Germans expressing a favorable view of the United States declined from 60 in 2002 to 31 in 2008.

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The APSA report here is consistent with findings from the annual "Transatlantic Trends" survey by the German Marshall Fund of the United States. Elsewhere, Indonesia went from 61 percent favorable in 2002 down to 15 percent favorable in 2003, before ticking back up into the high 30s after the United States provided massive aid following the devastating tsunami there in December 2004. Even staunch U.S. ally Japan registered a decline from 72 percent favorable to 50 percent. In the Middle East, favorability was and remains low everywhere but in Israel and Lebanon.

The APSA report also examines voting patterns in the United Nations, taking willingness or unwillingness to join with the United States on General Assembly resolutions as an indicator of U.S. standing. For most regions, the overall trendline for voting with the United States on resolutions has been downward since 1945, with a temporary upward spike in the late 1980s and 1990s as the Cold War came to an end. The report notes: "Astonishingly, the absolute level of agreement today between the United States and the typical country in each region is below the level of agreement between America and its existential rival, the Soviet Union, at the height of the Cold War." The ups and mostly downs of U.N. agreement appear to be unrelated to U.S. power, according to the widely used measure the report cites, and to U.S. share of world GDP, both of which have remained flat-ish.

The good news for those concerned about U.S. standing is that favorability ratings are up for 2009 in most areas, the Middle East being a notable exception. The "Obama Bounce," as the German Marshall Fund survey dubs it, is huge, especially but not only in Europe. In the "Transatlantic Trends" poll, in 2008 George W. Bush's approval rating in Germany was 12 percent; in 2009, Obama's was 92 percent. The figures for Italy were 27 percent and 91 percent. Poland and Romania were the two countries in the survey with the most favorable view of Bush in 2008 (including the United States), at 44 percent. Their approval of Obama in 2009 nevertheless rose, to 58 percent in Romania and 55 percent in Poland.

The potentially partisan aspects of the question of "standing," such as the fact that Obama made restoring American standing a theme of his 2008 campaign, led two members of the task force to dissent from the report, smelling a rat. George Washington University's Henry Nau, who served in the Reagan administration, and Stanford's Stephen Krasner (a Hoover Institution colleague), who was the State Department's director of policy planning in the George W. Bush administration, claim that "this report makes too much of the decline of U.S. standing, implicitly indicting the administration of George W. Bush and endorsing President Obama's rhetoric to 'restore' that standing." More fundamentally, they question the premise that standing as the report defines it "has independent consequences for effective diplomacy."

The concept of standing does indeed lend itself to polemics. For that reason among others, it's difficult to pin down. It's hard to say what standing is, where it comes from, and what you can do with more of it that you can't do with less of it. The APSA report says standing has "two key elements: credibility and esteem." It goes on to define credibility as "the U.S. government's ability to do what it says it is going to do" and esteem as "America's stature, or what America is perceived to 'stand for' in the hearts and minds of foreign publics and policymakers." It notes that the two components of standing "can be mutually reinforcing, but they can also be difficult to pursue in tandem—a trade-off implied by Machiavelli's famous dictum, 'It is much safer to be feared than loved.'"

Krasner and Nau, though writing in dissent, mainly agree with the report in its assessment of the importance of credibility. They also rightly recognize that the report's definition seems incomplete: Credibility is not something you enjoy solely on the basis of the ability to do what you say you will do, but also on the basis of a record of doing what you have said you would do. "Ability" frames the issue prospectively: Do you have what it takes to do what you say? That's not wrong: The prospective question of "ability" or capability is highly relevant when the subject is, for example, nuclear deterrence, and your capacity to blow your adversary to smithereens stands as a kind of proxy for your willingness to do so if provoked. Certainly no one will take seriously a promise made when the ability to fulfill it is obviously lacking. But everyday "credibility" is more about your record—a product of having kept promises and refrained from making promises you can't keep.

The APSA report makes the claim that "'standing' is significant for both scholarship and policy," and certainly that is easy to see with regard to the "credibility" component. Policymakers pay careful attention to the record of their adversaries and allies alike in assessing the likelihood that they will keep their word. A reckoning of the balance of military power in Europe in the 1990s would have shown that those European countries most concerned about ethnic cleansing in the Balkans had the ability to go to war to stop it on their own, without the United States. But Serbian ruler Slobodan Milosevic responded not so much to capability as to their recent record on the use of military force. He was undeterred. Credibility as capacity as well as a record of making good on promises (or failing to do so) is always worth studying. Israelis talk about the need to "restore" deterrence from time to time—that is, to take action to back up their threat to punish attackers. Such actions seek to demonstrate credibility.

But is credibility always an element of standing? A lack of credibility will presumably lower one's international standing, but high credibility will not necessarily increase it.

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That depends on the nature of the promises one makes. One does not advance in standing by credibly promising to do things no one else likes.

This is where "esteem" comes in. But esteem is a much more elusive concept. The report's first crack at a definition, "stature," is distinctly unhelpful. You could just as easily say that the two components of standing are "credibility" and "stature," defining the latter as "the esteem in which others hold the United States." If one is esteemed, one has stature. If anything, stature is a broader category than esteem. Stature might be construed as importance or consequentiality for better or worse, with esteem denoting positive stature.

The rest of the definition, "what America is perceived to 'stand for,'" begins to get us somewhere, but it needs examining. First, we need to know what others think America stands for. Then we need to know whether they like it—and why.

If America stands for things Americans and others think are good, then the esteem the United States thereby wins from others is straightforward. When America comes to stand for something that most Americans think is bad—the mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. service members at Abu Ghraib comes to mind—the United States suffers a loss of esteem that Americans themselves may agree is at least partially justified. But a genuine analytical problem arises when America stands for things others think are bad but Americans think are good. Credibility is always helpful, even (perhaps especially) for a liar—or someone who's bluffing. Esteem, not so. The Machiavelli aphorism quoted in the report only scratches the surface of the problem. Esteem in the form of approval of what America stands for is something U.S. policymakers might reasonably and knowingly choose to forgo; they might for good reason make policy choices they think will meet with the disapproval of others. If esteem is indeed an element of standing, high international standing will never be in the first rank of policy pursuits.

This problem will be familiar to those who have thought seriously about the related question of anti-Americanism: A certain large amount of it (though not all) is simply a response to policy choices the United States thinks it has made correctly but others don't like. The only way to avoid the negative reaction would be to make different choices.

And in the highly unlikely event that U.S. policymakers were willing to make the approval of others the gold standard for successful policymaking, they would still find it impossible to put the pursuit of good international standing first. The reason is simply that others disagree on what the United States should do in order to win their approval. This disagreement is sometimes fundamental: Think of what the United States might do to make the Arab world happy about Middle East policy versus what U.S. actions might please Israelis. Or the Chinese versus the Taiwanese. The esteem of one comes inseparably with the disdain of the other.

This permanent opposition brings to light the problem in its sharpest relief: One can take a perfectly "realist" approach to the question of esteem if one likes. Esteem is what you get when others approve of your conduct and therefore what you "stand for." But esteem is not then something of intrinsic value. The esteem of Britain is as good as the esteem of China is as good as the esteem of Libya is as good as the esteem of Sudan. Yet that is surely not what APSA is getting at.

The esteem of others is only intrinsically worthwhile if it reflects a common view of what is worthy of esteem. You need a norm of estimable conduct. Unfortunately, the way the norm usually arrives on the scene is by someone sneaking it in through the back door. You end up acting as if the esteem of those with whom you disagree over basic standards of behavior—for example, whether it's acceptable to persecute ethnic minorities or imprison people for expressing their political opinions—is the equal of the esteem of those with whom you agree on such standards. You reproach yourself for having earned the disdain of those whose views you yourself, in fact, disdain. Isn't that being a little hard on oneself?

The Krasner and Nau dissent focuses first on the partisan element (the tendency for Democrats to lament the loss of international standing when a Republican is in the White House and vice versa), next on the policy choices (in our example, what Taiwan would want versus what China would want), finally on whether "esteem" as opposed to credibility really explains anything.

Their points are well-taken, yet it is finally unpersuasive that the esteem of others doesn't matter at all to diplomacy. The main effect of the photos from Abu Ghraib was indeed to galvanize disapproval of the United States in a way that made life more difficult for Americans. At a minimum, as APSA president Peter Katzenstein remarked at the report's unveiling at the National Press Club, disapproval imposes opportunity costs, as policymakers have to spend their time addressing it.

But there are better and worse ways to think about esteem, its effects on U.S. standing, and what to do to address them. It is possible to worry too much about the bad opinion of others, especially when their opinions are not grounded in the same basic view of human rights and political rights. Better to focus on living up to one's own standards and on the potential for enlarging the space in which others share them. ♦

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'Galileo Before the Papal Tribunal' (1847) by Robert Henry

GETTY IMAGES

Reason for Faith

The two ideals need not be rivals

BY RYAN T. ANDERSON

The past few years have brought a revival of a largely 19th-century phenomenon: the attempt to deploy science to discredit religion. We've seen Richard Dawkins use evolutionary biology to explain away our *God Delusion* while Victor Stenger co-opted physics to explain that *God* is *The Failed Hypothesis* and *Science Shows That God Does Not Exist*. Daniel Dennett went to work *Breaking the Spell* to show *Religion as a Natural* [not supernatural] *Phenomenon*, while Sam Harris wrote *A Letter to a Christian Nation* noting *The End of Faith*. We've been warned about *The Theocons* and the Christianists, today's theocrats attempting to set up an *American Theocracy*.

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The story is always the same: a battle between irrational faith and rational science, in which the latter defeats the former. Of course, the real force behind these books is politics, especially where it intersects with morality. The new atheists aren't really concerned about baptisms or bar mitzvahs; they simply deplore the moral, political, and cultural values advanced by traditional Jews and Christians, and readily denounce all religious believers in an effort to discredit them. And of course, science is manipulated as the weapon of choice.

Galileo Goes to Jail
And Other Myths about Science and Religion
Edited by Ronald L. Numbers
Harvard, 320 pp., $27.95

None of this is new, really. As the editor of this volume, Ronald Numbers, points out, "the greatest myth in the history of science and religion holds that they have been in a state of constant conflict." Numbers knows this territory well; he's a distinguished scholar who has served as president of both the History of Science Society and the American Society of Church History. He points readers to 19th-century polemics—such as John William Draper's *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874) and Andrew D. White's *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896)—to

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explain how most Americans came to believe so many tall tales about the history of science and religion. Of these myths, the collection of essays in *Galileo Goes to Jail* aims to debunk 25 of the most prominent.

Though it is written by academics from Harvard, Oxford, Johns Hopkins, Chicago, and the like, the book is intended for nonspecialists. In about 10 pages per myth, the contributors explain the myth's content, how so many people have come to believe it, and what the historical evidence shows to the contrary. The authors necessarily spend the bulk of their time debunking attacks on religion in the name of science, but they also clear the muddy waters left behind when pro-religion forces try to obscure the scientific record.

So, for example, readers discover that Galileo never really was imprisoned (nor was he tortured), that Giordano Bruno was not a martyr on behalf of science (though he was persecuted for his heretical theological views as a defrocked monk who denied the doctrine of the Trinity), that "every important medieval thinker" rejected the flat-earth theory and held fast to a spherical-earth theory, and that "no evidence supports the notion" that Christianity opposed the use of anesthesia in childbirth.

Likewise, claims that the evidence for organic evolution rests on circular reasoning, that Darwin was complicit in Nazi biology, and that "Intelligent Design" mounts a scientific challenge to evolution are all thoroughly explored and roundly rejected.

We also learn that neither the atheists nor the evangelicals are right on Darwin: Evolution didn't lead him to reject Christianity (the untimely deaths of his father and daughter, coupled with the doctrine of eternal damnation, did), nor did he undergo a deathbed conversion. Likewise, despite attempts to list Einstein in the "pro-God" column, he didn't believe in a personal god or favor any traditional organized religion (his many statements on religion showing him to be more of a Spinozist). And regardless of what *Inherit the Wind* might have us believe about the Scopes "monkey trial," William Jennings Bryan triumphed on the stand and was widely hailed as a hero upon his death shortly thereafter.

In the grand scheme of things, some of these myths are rather unimportant, but it is always useful to get the historical record clear. Among the more interesting myths, though, are those involving Copernicus, Descartes, and Newton. In the popular telling of the tale, Copernicus knocked humanity off its pedestal at the center of the universe, Descartes invented the "ghost in the machine," and Newton's mechanistic cosmology eliminated any role for God. The popular tales are wrong on all three counts.

Isaac Newton contemplates an apple.

GETTY IMAGES

While the birth of heliocentrism certainly changed man's understanding of his place in the cosmos, it did so by "simultaneously [enhancing] the cosmic status of both earth and sun." The problem is that we read into the historical record assumptions that simply didn't exist back then; namely, that the center is somehow a privileged position. But the Jewish philosopher Maimonides argued that "in the case of the Universe . . . the nearer the parts are to the center, the greater is their turbidness, their solidity, their inertness, their dimness, and darkness." And the Roman Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas agreed that precisely because earth lay (as he thought) at the center, it was "the most material and coarsest (*ignobilissima*) of all bodies." In other words, the center was no privileged position.

But even if Copernicus had demoted the earth—notably, this spin wasn't proposed until a hundred years after his death—it wouldn't have been a problem for anyone who declared with the Psalmist, "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have established; what is man that you are mindful of him?"

Just as antireligion polemicists thought the demotion of the earth would be a fatal blow to traditional faith, so too did they think that attacking the ghost in the machine would do away with conceptions of the soul. The problem here is that Descartes explicitly rejected this image of how he thought the immaterial mind related to the material body, "asserting that mind and body are 'intermingled' so as to form a 'unitary whole.'"

Furthermore, traditional Christianity never took the dim view of the body that the polemicists, in rejecting Descartes's putative views, assumed it did. The strong Christian accent on our identity as embodied beings who hope in the resurrection of the body seems to have escaped them. Equally baffling are claims that Newton was a Deist who set up the Clockmaker God, for this conception of Newton "is more than just badly mistaken: it is precisely the opposite of the truth. It cannot simply be corrected; it must be utterly repudiated."

While Newton promoted a mechanistic physics, he held that "God governed the world actively and constantly." Newton explained this governance by

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appeals to alchemy—a part of his intellectual legacy (along with his lengthy biblical and theological treatises) that is constantly overlooked by popularizers of science history.

When one steps back to consider all the myths together, one notices a thread running through about half of them: the role that religion played, for better or worse, in developing the life of the mind and fostering scientific practice.

On the one hand, antireligion proponents argue that the birth of Christianity did away with ancient science, that medieval Christianity explicitly suppressed the beginnings of science, that Islamic culture was inhospitable to the scientific mindset, and that at the dawn of modernity, Catholics contributed nothing to the scientific enterprise.

On the other hand, some argue that Christianity alone—with its emphasis on God as *Logos* and the rational structure of creation—actually gave rise to science: Why is it, they ask, that across time and space, science only fully developed in one culture?

As both sets of myths are debunked, there emerges a rich tableau of the characters and scenes that helped produce modern science: the ancient Greek predecessors; the Islamic reception, development, and transmission of Greek thought; the Christian emphasis on the unity of truth in God and thus on investigation into the book of God's word (the Bible) and the book of God's work (nature); and the financial support of the institutional church, which founded the modern university. While Christianity wasn't the only factor that gave rise to modern science, it was certainly no hindrance. As one scholar put it, "The Roman Catholic Church gave more financial and social support to the study of astronomy for over six centuries, from the recovery of ancient learning during the late Middle Ages into the Enlightenment, than any other, and probably all other, institutions."

A book advancing such claims could easily have devolved into a slipshod production by pro-religion apologists. But *Galileo Goes to Jail* is nothing of the sort. Published by Harvard, it is rigorously researched and well footnoted, and written by 25 of the leading historians in the English-speaking world. And as Numbers points out in his introduction, fewer than half of the contributors are religious believers at all; and of those, there are only two evangelicals, one Catholic, and one Jew. In other words, they have no axe to grind, and their only agenda is to set the historical record straight.

Given all of the polemics published today, this is a breath of fresh air. Its organizers at the Templeton Foundation should consider producing a companion volume that focuses on more current debates, particularly on the philosophy of science, the philosophy of religion, and their intersection. It could bring together scientists, philosophers, and theologians to examine their respective disciplines' limits and potential areas of overlap.

It could remind us that natural science can reveal how the physical world works but not how we should act in it or what might exist above and beyond it; that, while physics is important, it is silent about metaphysics; and that those who look to the Bible for details on biology or cosmology had better look elsewhere. ♦

B&A

Signing the Blues

How London commemorates its resident immortals.

BY EDWARD SHORT

Leigh Hunt, the littérateur and friend of Byron, Shelley, Keats, and Lamb, is now little read, but his autobiography vividly recalls early 19th-century Chelsea. Of 22 Upper Cheyne Row, where he lived with his wife and seven children, Hunt wrote:

> The house was of that old-fashioned sort which I have always loved best, familiar to the eyes of my parents, and associated with my childhood. It had seats in the windows, a small third room on the first floor, of which I made a *sanctum* . . . and . . . a few lime trees in front, which in their due season diffused a fragrance.

After years spent eluding creditors—literary journalism then being no more remunerative than it is now—Hunt welcomed the peacefulness of Chelsea. "I felt for some weeks," he wrote, "as if I could sit still for ever, embalmed in the silence." Only the songs of street sellers broke the riverside quiet. Hunt particularly recalled "an old seller of fish . . . whose cry of 'shrimps as large as prawns' was such a regular, long-drawn, and truly pleasing melody, that in spite of his hoarse and, I am afraid, drunken voice, I used to wish for it of an evening, and hail it when it came."

Lived in London
Blue Plaques and the Stories Behind Them
Edited by Emily Cole
Yale, 656 pp., $85

This is precisely the sort of domestic history that the blue plaques, set up throughout London by the Greater London Council, London County Council, and English Heritage, were created to evoke. When Hunt lived in Chelsea in the early 1830s, it was a cheap, uncrowded, unfashionable district. His neighbors, Jane Welsh Carlyle and her combustible husband, paid £35 a year for their rambling house at 24 Cheyne Row, which is now the Carlyle Museum. Later the district would cater more to plutocrats than bohemians. Still, the list of Chelsea residents who have received blue plaques is impressive, including as it does Lillie Langtry, Arnold Bennett, Dame Sybil Thorndyke, Sir Stafford Cripps, Augustus John, Sylvia Pankhurst, Hilaire Belloc, George Eliot, Mark Twain, Scott of Antarctica, and

Edward Short is a writer in New York.

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Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the great civil engineer.

In this wonderful *tour d'horizon* of the blue plaque scheme, Emily Cole relates how the idea for the plaques, first floated by the reformer William Ewart in 1863, and carried out by the civil servant Laurence Gomme, grew out of the same solicitude for preserving England's past that inspired the founding of the National Portrait Gallery (1856), Society of the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce (1866), and the Dictionary of National Biography (1882).

Since Gomme took over the project, honorees have been chosen in accordance with simple criteria: They must have been dead at least 20 years and made some signal contribution to their profession. Of course, there have been exceptions: Gladstone, Gandhi, Marconi, and John Galsworthy all got plaques sooner than 20 years after their deaths. And beginning in 1954, the practice ended of marking sites, rather than actual residences, where honorees lived.

Ideally, plaques commemorate both biographical and architectural history. Apropos the plaque at 91 Gower Street for the architect George Dance, who designed Newgate Prison and the Royal College of Surgeons, one historian pointed out: "It is no doubt fitting that the architect should have chosen as his London home for many years one of the simple but excellently proportioned brick built terrace houses that were such an important contribution to the Georgian townscape." Dance was also responsible for the circus and crescent layouts that would become so characteristic of the city's town planning. And he drew up ambitious plans for the redevelopment of London's waterfront which, of course, were never executed.

Another plaque of architectural interest is the one affixed to the former residence of W.S. Gilbert at 39 Harrington Gardens in South Kensington, where the dramatist wrote *The Mikado*, *The Yeoman of the Guard*, and *The Gondoliers*. On the gable of this fantastic dwelling Gilbert requested his architects to insert a sailing ship to commemorate his descent from the seafarer Sir Humphrey Gilbert. When one guest assumed that the ship was an allusion to *H.M.S. Pinafore*, the dramatist curtly corrected him: "Sir, I do not put my trademark on my house."

Cole includes much out-of-the-way biographical and historical detail in her book and a rich gallimaufry of prints, photographs, drawings, and paintings illustrating the people and places described in the text. She deserves high praise for putting together such an inspired history. Coffee table books rarely come packed with so many good things. The book's maps are particularly good. Splendidly hand-drawn by Malcolm Fowler, they nicely locate the whereabouts of the plaques and quantify their number by district.

ADAM WOOLFITT / CORBIS

Hackney, for example, may only have five blue plaques, but they commemorate an arresting array of famous Londoners. There is a plaque for Marie Lloyd, the great music hall artist whom T.S. Eliot admired for "her understanding of the people and sympathy with them, and the people's recognition of the fact that she embodied the virtues which they genuinely most respected in private life." Another for Joseph Priestley, the Presbyterian minister and Enlightenment philosopher, whose support for the French Revolution eventually led to his leaving England and taking up residence in Pennsylvania, where he died waiting for the Second Coming. And still another for Daniel Defoe, the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, whose hero James Joyce considered "the true symbol of British conquest" because, "shipwrecked on a lonely island, with a knife and a pipe in his pocket, [he became] an architect, carpenter, knife-grinder, astronomer, baker, shipwright, potter, saddler, farmer, tailor, umbrella-maker, and cleric."

As these Hackney plaques show, even in one of London's least glamorous locales, history abounds.

In fashionable Mayfair, 45 plaques recall some of the most powerful figures in English history, including Lord Clive, Lord Palmerston, and Lord Nelson. Then there are plaques commemorating the great dandies Beau Brummel and Benjamin Disraeli, the former of whom ended his days in a French lunatic asylum after running up gambling debts he could not repay. And there is a plaque for a man who proved that, in England, there are not only second acts but third and fourth and fifth acts. General John Burgoyne, "Gentleman Johnny" as he was called, may have surrendered to the Americans at Saratoga in 1777, but he went on to have a lucrative playwriting career after joining Charles James Fox and the Whigs in parliament and serving as commander in chief in Ireland. The house he had Robert Adam furnish for him at 10 Hertford Street was originally designed by Henry Holland, who also designed Carlton House, Brooks Club, and the Brighton Pavilion.

Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the Irish playwright who had enormous successes with *The Rivals* and *The School for Scandal*, also lived in Hertford Street until his beloved theater, Drury Lane, burned down and he had to sell his furniture to keep the bailiffs at bay—only escaping debtor's prison, as Cole remarks, because his doctor insisted that moving the distressed playwright would kill him.

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Sheridan recalls something that the perennially hard-up Cyril Connolly came to recognize: that London "was created for rich young men to shop in, dine in, ride in, get married in, go to theaters in, and die in as respected householders. It is a city for the unmarried upper classes, not for the poor."

This has always spurred London's enterprising poor to escape poverty. George Leybourne, a.k.a. "Champagne Charlie," was the poor son of a currier, who got his start, together with Gracie Fields and Charlie Chaplin, at Collins Music Hall, Islington Green, when he was still in his teens. After scoring hits with "Champagne Charlie" and "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze" in the 1860s, Leybourne was paid the unprecedented annual salary of £1,500—mostly by men in the drinks trade eager to have him tout their bubbly. At the age of 42, however, after nearly 30 years on the music hall stage, Leybourne was dead of cirrhosis of the liver. A plaque commemorates his fizzy rise and fall at 136 Engelfield Road, Islington.

That so many dedicated to amusing London came to smash would not have surprised Dickens. In his moving essay "Night Walks," describing the noctambulatory forays he made through the city after the death of his father, whose own reversals landed him in the Marshalsea Prison, Dickens described the misery that gives so much of London its bleak distinction. There are no blue plaques to mark the sleeping places of London's poor, whose houseless heads and unfed sides, whose looped and windowed raggedness, inspire no memorials. But there is a magnificent blue plaque commemorating Dickens's residence at 48 Doughty Street, Bloomsbury, where he wrote *The Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, and *Nicholas Nickleby*. Erected in 1903, it predates the opening of the Dickens Museum on this site in 1925.

The wretchedness that Dickens encountered in the city at night is one reason why London has always produced a high proportion of good popular writers with no interest in bothering readers with life's grimmer realities. In Mayfair, blue plaques commemorate Somerset Maugham, who shared a flat with his wife, Syrie Wellcome, the interior decorator, at 6 Chesterfield Street before he took up with Gerald Haxton, an exuberant alcoholic who was fond of diving into empty swimming pools; Nancy Mitford, who worked at Heywood Hill's bookshop at 10 Curzon Street, before winning fame and fortune with her popular novels and biographies; and P.G. Wodehouse, who wrote 10 of his 90-odd novels, including *Summer Lightning*, *Very Good, Jeeves*, and *Right Ho, Jeeves* at 17 Dunraven (formerly Norfolk) Street.

Wodehouse's stepdaughter described the house as full of servants with strict orders never to disturb their literary master. "It is understood that he is thinking deep thoughts and planning great novels, but when all the smoke has cleared away it really means that he is either asleep or eating an apple or reading Edgar Wallace."

If the blue plaques are a kind of historical stock-taking, they recall the personal stock-taking of the residents they memorialize. Cardinal Manning, for example, who followed Newman into the Roman Catholic Church in 1851, has a plaque in Westminster commemorating his residence at 22 Carlisle Place, a forbiddingly austere palace, which remained the residence of the archbishops of Westminster until 1901. From his bedroom window, Manning, who toyed with the idea of entering politics as a young man, could see the Houses of Parliament, which caused him to reflect in old age: "If I had been able to have my own way and to go there, what a rascal I should have been by this time!" ♦

B&A

Forgotten Founder

The French colonel who wrote the book(s) on counterinsurgency. **BY ANN MARLOWE**

Who was David Galula?

This question must have occurred to many readers of the new U.S. Army Counterinsurgency Field Manual. In the near panic to understand the Iraq insurgency, FM 3-24 was downloaded 1.5 million times just in its first month after being posted on military websites in 2006.

"Of the many books that were influential in the writing of Field Manual 3-24," say its coauthors, "perhaps none was as important as David Galula's *Counterinsurgency Warfare*."

American officers about to deploy to Afghanistan and Iraq scrambled to find out who this Galula was, and why the FM 3-24 authors—Gen. David Petraeus and Col. Conrad Crane and Lt. Col. John Nagl—thought he was so important. But almost no biographical information was available.

Ann Marlowe reports frequently from Afghanistan and is working on a book about David Galula and the origins of counterinsurgency theory.

When I began to research Galula's life, first casually and then with a biography in mind, I discovered that he'd been prominent enough in his short lifetime to earn an obituary in the *New York Times* ("David Galula, 48, French Army Aide"). He had attracted the support of one of the most powerful and celebrated advocates of counterinsurgency in his day, Gen. Edward Lansdale, who wrote in 1962 that he hoped Galula would "write the book which he long ago promised me he would write, about Mao's revolutionary warfare in practice."

Then, as I learned more about the beginnings of counterinsurgency theory in the 1950s and '60s, I realized that Galula was not a solitary visionary but the most articulate of a large number of military men who had been part of a nearly forgotten movement. While the stereotype is that Americans learned

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about the importance of counterinsurgency in Vietnam, but promptly forgot it afterwards, the reverse is closer to the truth.

There was an ample literature on counterinsurgency theory—COIN, in military parlance—by 1965. In fact, a long stream of books in English on counterinsurgency began in 1958 with Lederer and Burdick's bestselling novel, *The Ugly American*, which urged the study of Mao and unconventional warfare. A favorite of then-Senator John F. Kennedy, who had leapt on the COIN bandwagon and hoped to reform the American military to fight new kinds of wars, *The Ugly American* contained a sympathetic character based on Lansdale.

In 1962, *The Guerrilla and How to Fight Him*, a compilation of articles from a special issue of the *Marine Corps Gazette*, was published with a foreward from President Kennedy. In 1965 journalist Robert Taber published the left-slanted *The War of the Flea*. (The entire first printing of Taber was bought up by the American military and became required reading for Special Forces officers.) The British general Sir Robert Thompson, well known as a counterinsurgency guru in Malaya in the 1950s, published *Defeating Communist Insurgency* in 1966.

The recently deceased military historian Stephen Bowman has noted that, in 1963, "The Special Operations Research Office, under contract to the Army, published *A Counterinsurgency Bibliography* which contained 965 different sources concerned with counterinsurgency." And especially during the Kennedy presidency, COIN was fashionable in intellectual circles. There were powerful men in the Army and the State Department who understood and applied COIN in the early days of American involvement in South Vietnam. In fact, Galula would never have penetrated as close as he did to the heart of the American military establishment had he been advocating something unknown or disturbing: His near-vanishing from the historical record is more a matter of bad luck than historical injustice.

Galula wrote two books, more or less at the same time, in 1962-3. The book referred to in FM 3-24 and taught in the war colleges today is *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, written when he was a research associate at Harvard's Center for International Affairs. Almost completely theoretical, it aims to establish "the laws of counterrevolutionary warfare." Published in 1964 by Praeger, which released perhaps a dozen other volumes on counterinsurgency around this time, it received a small flutter of attention.

Galula's book was cited as "the 'how-to' book in the field—and the best of them all" by the French Indochina expert Bernard Fall in his 1964 *Street Without Joy*. In February 1964 the *New York Times* gave Galula a brief review, along with Roger Trinquier's *Modern Warfare*, but the reviewer praised the reactionary Trinquier and granted Galula only a grudging sentence. In May 1964, the American journalist Eric Larrabee mentioned Galula's *Counterinsurgency Warfare* in a round-up article for *Harper*'s entitled "Books on Guerrilla Warfare—Fifteen Years Overdue." In those days counterinsurgency (also called "revolutionary warfare" or "guerrilla warfare") was a topic which an educated person might be expected to follow.

Col. David Galula, 1957

COURTESY OF THE GALULA FAMILY

Galula's other book, *Pacification in Algeria 1956-1958*, arrived nearly stillborn, classified as "confidential" when it was written as a 1962 report for RAND. At the time, Algeria was in turmoil and some of the commanders he referred to were active in the OAS, the rightwing French terrorist organization, which may explain the classification. Just a few hundred copies seem to have been published, and the work couldn't be cited in unclassified literature. The only citation of it which I have seen was in a formerly classified USAID study from September 25, 1967, located by the young French scholar Elie Tenenbaum.

Counterinsurgency Warfare was never lost to the world. It likely had a minor influence on American thinking about Vietnam. Tenenbaum has also located a March 1968 proposal sent by Ambassador-at-large Henry Cabot Lodge to President Lyndon Johnson for replacing "search and destroy" missions in Vietnam by "house by house" policing, "much as was done by Gen. Massu in Algiers and which is set forth in Galula's book *Counterinsurgency Warfare*." As Tenenbaum notes, three months later Johnson relieved Gen. William Westmoreland, replacing him with Gen. Creighton Abrams, who put an end to the "search and destroy" operations Lodge criticized.

Military intellectuals cited *Counterinsurgency Warfare* regularly in bibliographies in the 1980s and '90s—that's how the authors of FM 3-24 came to read it in their own student days—but it eventually went out of print, and was republished only through a complex chain of recent events in which the journalist/military historian Thomas Ricks played a major role.

Nor was COIN theory ever wholly forgotten. In his 1982 Duke master's thesis, Stephen Bowman writes that the term "counterinsurgency," when mentioned to an officer in the Army, "arouses little curiosity or excitement. But counterinsurgency is an accepted doctrinal mission of the U.S. Army." Bowman would later teach at West Point and head the military history department at the Army War College. His brilliant thesis is cited by Andrew Krepinevich in *The Army and Vietnam* (1986), a masterly and influential indictment of the Army's failure to use COIN. Yet while Krepinevich's view has become accepted wisdom, Bowman's more nuanced assessment has been ignored.

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One reason may be that Krepinevich satisfied a need for the Army to beat up on itself after Vietnam. Recently, some military intellectuals have begun to challenge this picture, and the most outspoken is the head of the military history department at West Point, Col. Gian Gentile. He and others have suggested that COIN was not appropriate for all phases of the Vietnam war, and, worse, the fashionable emphasis on COIN is producing just as stifling an intellectual conformity today as the preference for "massive retaliation" did in the 1950s.

This is the last thing Galula would have wanted. If there is anything to take away from his two books, it is the rigor, analytical sophistication, and capacity for self-criticism that he brought to his task. But rest assured, reading Galula is a pleasure, not a duty: He is a beautiful writer—in his second or third language, no less—and both his books are worth perusing. *Counterinsurgency Warfare* explains how insurgent movements work and the strategy for combating them; *Pacification in Algeria* is about day-to-day tactics and grand strategy and politics, and is probably of greater interest to the general reader.

Though somewhat fragmentary, *Pacification* is almost novelistic in its detail, and the only book on counterinsurgency that rises to the level of tragedy. It suggests that counterinsurgency is a long, difficult, perilously personality-dependent slog—the very opposite of a simple formula. (Galula notes that the two officers who replaced him in his command at Djebel Aissa Mimoun in Algeria were quickly shot dead, as his predecessor had been.)

His strategy focused on providing security to the people, not on chasing the guerrillas who harassed them, and his approach became known in military circles as "population-centric." On a tactical level, the innovation that recommended Galula to the American military was deliberately placing small numbers of soldiers among the people they were protecting while simultaneously using these troops to lead public-works projects. Galula is probably the first person to write about how to do this, though not the first modern commander to practice it. (The Marines had worked with local security forces in villages in the Dominican Republic during 1916-22 in a program that was copied successfully in Vietnam as "Combined Action Platoons," or CAPs.)

To American military intellectuals, Galula's practices were a revelation. In Iraq and Afghanistan, American troops had been living on large, highly protected Forward Operating Bases. They would patrol in the villages and cities where people lived, but vanish at night into the FOBs—a practice General Petraeus has criticized as "commuting to work." The U.S. Army, concerned with the progress of the counterinsurgency in Iraq, embraced Galula's "population-centric" insights wholeheartedly—and his radical tactics somewhat less wholeheartedly. Even three years after the publication of FM 3-24, it's impossible to find Galula's two books available for sale online for much below their list price.

But while Galula has become more famous in death than he ever was in his lifetime, his life is still unknown. It is fascinating in its own right, still more so for the light it sheds on the development of COIN theory in the crucibles of the Chinese revolution and the French struggles in Indochina and Algeria.

I was lucky enough to make contact with David Galula's widow, Ruth Morgan Galula. Now in her late eighties, she is quick, funny, sophisticated, and has an astonishingly good memory for the details of her husband's life.

Little in Galula's early life suggests that he would become a major military theoretician, least of all in the English language. He was born in 1919 to a prominent Jewish clan in Sfax, Tunisia, the sixth of seven children and the only boy. The family was secular and worldly, but his parents were first cousins through their mothers, a common occurrence among Sephardic Jews. In 1924 his father, Albert Galula, obtained French citizenship for himself and his children, including David—something that was never automatic for Tunisians.

After a business partnership with his brother-in-law went bankrupt, Albert moved his family to Casablanca. David attended the Lycée Lyautey, one of the best French overseas lycées, named for the general who pacified Morocco. Young Galula preferred to play hooky, going riding or swimming. In his teens he became interested in the French military: One of his maternal aunts had married an army officer, and David became fascinated with the idea of attending

The Galula clan in Tunisia, ca. 1910

COURTESY OF THE GALULA FAMILY

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Saint-Cyr and following in his footsteps.

Galula graduated from Saint-Cyr in 1939, and by the following June, the Germans had taken Paris. To keep the young Jewish officer away from the Nazis, and to do something useful for the Free French (the Vichy regime would eventually expel all Jews from the officer corps), Galula was sent to work as a spy in Tangier. Once Casablanca was taken by the Allies in November 1942, Galula joined the Free French Army, fighting under General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny in the re-capture of Elba in 1944, and then in Toulon, and on through Alsace-Lorraine to the Rhine.

At about this time he had an extraordinary stroke of luck: Captain—later Colonel—Jacques Guillermaz became his commanding officer. An accomplished Sinologist, Guillermaz chose Galula as one of three officers to accompany him to China when he resumed his duties there as French military attaché. In China, Galula would get to study Mao's revolutionary warfare at first hand.

Starting in September 1945, he spent six months in Chongqing before moving to Beijing for language training. There he encountered another student, the young American journalist Seymour Topping, later of the *New York Times*. Topping remembers Galula very clearly: He based Jean Leone, a character in his 1999 novel of the Chinese civil war, *The Peking Letter*, on him. (Leone invites the narrator to share his traditional Chinese house with him, just as Galula did with Topping. Leone/Galula is depicted as a worldly cynic and connoisseur of fine food and wine.)

At this time Galula would have been reading Chinese revolutionary warfare theory. Mao was not translated into French until 1950, so Galula is likely to have studied him in English. A U.S. Marine captain, Samuel B. Griffith, had translated Mao for the *Marine Corps Gazette* back in 1941; later Griffith, by then a retired brigadier general, published a book of Mao's writings, *On Guérilla Warfare*, in 1962, as well as translating Mao's great influence, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. A copy of this was among Galula's books when he died in 1967: Galula and Griffith had met in northern China when Griffith commanded a Marine regiment at the end of World War II.

Galula was next posted to Thessalonika as an observer with the United Nations Special Committee on the Balkans, where he witnessed the end of the cruel, ruinous Greek civil war. Then he returned to Paris to do Deuxième Bureau work: The "second bureau" of the General Staff, although technically dissolved in 1940, is the informal term for France's military intelligence service.

In 1951, Galula replaced Guillermaz as the naval and military attaché at the French consulate in Hong Kong. He discussed politics with visiting journalists and intelligence specialists, including Henry Luce and Joseph Alsop, both of whom would later visit his district in Algeria and write about it.

But the most influential contacts of his later career were General Lansdale, who wrote in a letter that he met Galula "around 1955," and Gen. Raoul Salan, commander in chief of French forces in Indochina during 1952-3. (Mrs. Galula says that, even at this stage, General Salan was aware of her husband's thinking on counterinsurgency.) In 1956 Galula volunteered to fight in Algeria, and he wrote his first "Notes on Pacification" in November of that year, three months after his arrival—a point when most American company commanders will tell you they are just starting to get the lay of the land in a new deployment.

Galula, however, had two advantages our young commanders do not. The first was his experience in and around China observing Mao's guerrilla tactics, emphasizing the need to win the allegiance of the population. The second factor was the openness of the French Army to innovation in colonial warfare. By the time of the Algerian war, the French had powerful evangelists for what was called "revolutionary warfare" (*guerre révolutionnaire*). All the major French thinkers on *guerre révolutionnaire* had fought in Indochina and learned from the French defeat, as the military historian Peter Paret has written, "that an inferior force could outpoint a modern army so long as it succeeded in gaining at least the tacit support of the population in the contested area."

Col. Jean Gilles, Gen. Raoul Salan, Indochina, 1952

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Galula's operational zone in Algeria, Kabylia, was one of several experimental zones where French commanders tried out *guerre révolutionnaire* ideas; Galula was not the only innovator. But his success in Djebel Aissa Mimoun and in his second posting at Bourj Menaiel, where he was promoted to major, attracted the notice of higher commanders.

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Still, imaginative officers like Galula had no ultimate impact on the war. The Galulas were in Algiers for the 1958 coup when Gen. Salan and Gen. Jacques Massu, the paratroop commander, demanded the return of Charles de Gaulle to political power in France. By the summer of 1959, Galula was working in French military intelligence in the Deuxième Bureau in Paris. He visited the United States in 1960 for six months of study at the Armed Forces Staff College in Norfolk, Virginia.

By 1961 Galula was back at the Deuxième Bureau working for President de Gaulle's "crisis office" during a tumultuous time for Algeria. According to his widow, Galula agreed with de Gaulle that Algerian independence "was not the right thing to do but it was the necessary thing," and Lansdale has written that Galula avoided "entanglement in right and left extremist activities." In 1962, however, he retired from the army.

His next stop was Harvard's Center for International Affairs, where Gen. William Westmoreland, then the West Point superintendent and later commander of U.S. forces in South Vietnam, helped him obtain a position as research associate. At Harvard Galula became close friends with Henry Kissinger, associate director of the center and head of Harvard's Defense Studies Program. But the center's head, Robert Bowie, was at daggers drawn with Kissinger and thought Galula was a "reactionary." What the Galulas had hoped would be a long-term Harvard appointment ended in November 1963.

The Galulas wanted to live in the United States, and David wanted to find employment that would better support his family. High-level American jobs, however, required that he give up his French citizenship. So, in 1964, he went to work for a French manufacturer of long-range radar equipment, and in 1966 moved to London to begin work as a liaison officer for NATO's Air Defense Ground Environment Consortium.

In the spring of 1967, Galula was having digestive problems, which propelled him to the American Hospital in Paris; there he was found to have inoperable lung cancer. In his last weeks he reread the three volumes of General de Gaulle's war memoirs, and on May 11, 1967, at the age of 48, Lieutenant Colonel David Galula was dead.

The brief details of Galula's life suggest the complexity of the intellectual influences on what is now called population-centric counterinsurgency theory, as well as the role of simple luck in determining which books and ideas in the marketplace exert influence, and when. Galula's seminal works caution us that counterinsurgency is not nearly as easy as some popularizers of his ideas seem to believe, nor is it a one-size-fits-all solution for every conflict in the world. Military thought is shaped by intellectual fashion as much as any other field. ♦

B&A

Dime-a-Dance

Surrounded by blogs, what's a critic to do?

BY NATALIE AXTON

Two months ago I had the distinct pleasure of witnessing the devaluation of print journalism. It was a weekend performance of Christopher Wheeldon's *Morphoses* at Central Park's Summerstage. I was caged in the press section, right of stage and on ground level. Robert Greskovic from the *Wall Street Journal* was in the cage as well. Seats in front of me were reserved for the *New Yorker*'s Joan Acocella. Every writer brought a boyfriend. It was business as usual.

Usual, that is, until five minutes to curtain, when I saw a harried press agent running with a cup of white wine. Potables being one of the few merits of outdoor performances, I was beginning to think I would like this performance of *Morphoses* just fine. But the agent passed the critics' section, heading for back bleachers. He took that wine to Tonya Plank, a blogger who calls herself the Swan Lake Samba Girl. He looked nervous.

Previously a thankless job, arts criticism is enjoying a new vogue online. Suddenly, there are thousands of blogs devoted to all matters of arts mania. Want to read about heartthrob baritones, dance on camera, or the politics of the stagehand's union? There's a blog for you. Don't care to read? Highlight videos are delivered via Twitter.

An arts enthusiast has no reason to buy a newspaper, which makes some people angry. Elizabeth Zimmer recently described the blogosphere as a "miasma of amateur expression." The stalwart critic of the *Village Voice* might be right on that note: In the anti-authoritarian world of the Internet, criticism is laypeople talking to laypeople, who seem to like that just fine.

All the same, the restructuring of the newspaper industry poses real problems for arts organizations. With a diminishing number of full-time critics, defining exactly who is and is not "press" can be a tricky issue. In a field with little monetary reward, artists compete for column space. Any coverage is better than none, especially in a crowded field with many shows playing to audiences of 80 to 100 people and running only three or four nights. Without a written record, what's the point? Bloggers increasingly make the press list, for better *and* worse.

Arts opinion-writing has a higher barrier to entry than political or financial commentary: Critics need to see the work and be familiar with its history, most of which is never recorded

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in libraries, real or virtual. Age is an advantage; so is professional association. Professional critics rarely fall under the spell of arts organizations' own publicity, which has been increasing since the 1980s. The pros would never reprint press releases verbatim, as is common among the bloggers, who draw no line between criticism and promotion and don't seem to realize when they're waxing polemical.

Some professional critics have adopted the blog format, with caveats. James Wolcott writes primarily online, yet no one would call him a blogger. *Arts Journal*, a non-paying arts writing aggregator, has given newspaper critics, both employed and recently laid-off, an online home. John Rockwell blogs there; so does Terry Teachout. There are no hard rules, but I sense a growing pressure on critics to maintain a personal web presence. The *New Yorker*'s Alex Ross has little to blog, yet he does at therestisnoise.com. The *New York Times* dance writer Claudia LaRocco writes more personally on her blog for WNYC, where she responds to (and usually accommodates) her coterie of "commenters."

This seems like unpaid overtime at its worst, but online writing allows critics to target a more specific audience. A conference of agreeable minds can be quite pleasant, when your interests have put you in a minority. The trade-off is that the tone is considerably sharper, especially when comments are enabled. Add the immediacy of online publication and you have a recipe for highbrow snark and meta-criticism. Straddling formats can be rewarding.

In 1985 when I was nine my grandmother gave me a small clock radio, and at night I would tune in to my favorite program, Karl Haas's *Adventures in Good Music*. I remember Haas's orotund voice and the show's theme, Beethoven's *Pathétique Sonata*, second movement. Haas's program wasn't really journalistic; but it was didactic, covering musical structure, technique, and history in happy reverence. (With what regret he would fade out of a passage if it was running him overtime!) The show was also popular, nationally syndicated from 1970 and inducted into the Radio Hall of Fame in 1997. It defined an alternative to pop music.

Adventures in Music was my first course in music appreciation, free of charge. Haas's contemporary analogue might be James Jorden, a writer/blogger/opera critic who publishes a self-described queer opera blog, "PARTERRE Box presents La Cieca," or parterre.com for short. Parterre.com began as a hard copy "zine" in the 1990s, went exclusively online in 2001, and with the advent of Web 2.0, has flourished.

Jorden is no stranger to arts journalism. He has written for the *Gay City News* and provided commentary for WNYC. But it is on the blog as La Cieca that he really hits his stride. Parterre.com receives approximately 10,000 hits a day—a big number in the arts blogosphere—and the site carries advertisements for Amazon. La Cieca's podcasts, *Unnatural Acts of Opera*, are distributed by iTunes. Jorden is currently the opera critic for the *New York Post*, but it was La Cieca that the Metropolitan Opera invited to live-blog its fall season press announcement, not James Jorden.

Most bloggers lack Jorden's knowledge and wit, and the majority of arts blogs are poorly written and uninformative. But they do have a growing readership, and that makes them important. Sometimes self-important. An extreme case arose last spring when blogger Ryan Tracy launched a campaign to succeed Gérard Mortier as director of the New York City Opera. Amazingly, he received several endorsements, and not despite but *because* his primary qualification was the publicity of his blog! (Mortier was formerly the director of the Salzburg Festival and does not blog.)

I tried blogging for a while and decided it's not for me. The immediacy of it let me give in to all my worst impulses—try for yourselves—so I think I'll ride this print thing out. Wine is so many empty calories, and I'm a little bit afraid of the Swan Lake Samba Girl. ♦

B&A

Scholar-Craftsman

Merrill Peterson, 1921-2009

BY EDWIN M. YODER JR.

In The Jefferson Image in the American Mind *(1960), Merrill Peterson of the University of Virginia patented a new kind of history—the history of a great reputation. Peterson traced the "image" of Jefferson as it evolved and showed that Jefferson had been a mirror in which each age saw itself reflected . . . [as] the touchstone of democratic legitimacy. Thirty-five years later, Peterson added an illuminating companion piece,* Lincoln in American Memory. . . . *From the outset, as Peterson showed, the problem of distinguishing the cultic from the historical has been almost as formidable in Lincoln's case as Albert Schweitzer found it to be when, a century ago, he conducted his "quest for the historical Jesus."*

Edwin M. Yoder Jr., a former columnist and editor in Washington, is the author, most recently, of Lions at Lamb House.

I wrote those words more than a decade ago, and there is no reason to qualify them at Merrill Peterson's death at the age of 88 in Charlottesville, where he served for decades as professor of history.

Peterson was one of a magisterial cadre of 20th-century American historians (including C. Vann Woodward, David Donald, and David Potter), most of whom happened to

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be specialists in Southern history. He himself was a tall, genial Kansan by origin; but his translation to the University of Virginia in mid-career anointed him, by association, as a sort of honorary Southerner.

That, in turn, exposed him to an ironic hazard. He was one of two great Jefferson biographers—the other was Dumas Malone—who were occasionally caricatured as a "Charlottesville mafia," fiercely defending Jefferson from imputations of an improper sexual relationship. To know Merrill Peterson even slightly, as I did, was to see the absurdity of the caricature, not less in his case than in Malone's. They did not care about the possible clay feet. They cared about evidence. And yet the canard persisted. At Peterson's death a colleague in the University of Virginia history department told the *Washington Post* that, as supposed "evidence" of Jefferson's liaison with Sally Hemings grew, Peterson "didn't argue with it. He just distanced himself from that discussion."

My own guess about that "distancing" is this: Peterson knew that historical inquiry rarely, if ever, lends itself to demonstrating negatives. I imagine that it was that conviction that led him to ignore the unfolding Hemings controversy. But thereby hung the irony. For Peterson was, indeed, one of the authoritative guardians—one might even say modern creators—of what he called (in the title of his Bancroft Prize masterwork) "the Jefferson image in the American mind." No one had more carefully examined Jefferson's life and influence or the mysterious processes by which national heroes take on a nimbus of mixed worship and detraction.

Which is to say that his specialty was the evolution and power of ideas—the ideas that Jefferson and Lincoln generated, as well as the ideas their countrymen later came to entertain about their ultimate significance. Intellectual history, so-called, has been out of fashion lately, especially among apostles of "bottom-up" social history—who are almost invariably devoted to some form of determinism. Yet ideas, far more than social or economic forces, are often the chief propellant of human history, as Keynes insisted when he wrote in *The General Theory* that "the world is governed by little else."

Merrill Peterson's brand of the history of ideas required its practitioners to delve into the caprices of popular memory. Jefferson was the great ideologue of democracy, eventually claimed as Founder by nearly every shade and school of political opinion—with the proving exception of Jefferson's original Federalist foes. Those who remembered Jefferson as the prophet of human equality could cite his Declaration of Independence (as Lincoln did at Gettysburg); the would-be Confederate states with which Lincoln was at war could view the Jefferson of the Virginia Resolution of 1798 as the prophet of "interposition," even secession. What Jefferson himself would have thought of these ultimate evolutions of his thought none can say.

Merrill Peterson, 2005

DAN ADDISON / U.VA PUBLIC AFFAIRS

The martyred Lincoln's former law partner "Billy" Herndon scoured the backwoods of Illinois and Kentucky for Lincoln reminiscences of every degree of reliability, from fact to pure fancy. Herndon's endeavor (especially his unresting effort to dash sentimental notions of Lincoln's piety) became the overture to an endless process of mythologizing. Rarely has the power of myth been so cogently or interestingly inspected as it was by Peterson in *Lincoln in American Memory* (1994). On these two great and original works—the Lincoln study and *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*—as on his one-volume Jefferson biography and his magisterial study of the Compromise of 1850—rests Merrill Peterson's reputation. It is formidable, and will endure.

A personal footnote: When the late Staige Blackford, editor of the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, asked Peterson to review one of my books (from which the opening quotation is drawn), he politely declined. I was disappointed, of course. But Peterson told Blackford that, since he had been favorably mentioned in the book, he feared being less than objective. Nothing was said about that great bugaboo, "the conflict of interest." Good historians rise well above such conflicts, which smack of personal favor and whim and do small justice to their professional standards and scruples.

For Peterson, the integrity of the past was a legacy approaching the sacred. Had he reviewed my amateur history, professional candor might have obliged him to note differences of interpretation and even an error or two; so he had to choose between friendship and history; and he chose history—rightly so. His was no frivolous or finicking scruple. It was Merrill Peterson's obeisance to the contours of the past. And that, after all, is the first obligation of a great historian. ♦

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Why Me?

The Coens wrestle with the God of the Old Testament.

BY JOHN PODHORETZ

In their scorchingly intelligent, profoundly surprising, and mesmerizingly punishing new film, the Oscar-winning Coen brothers return to the city, period, and faith of their boyhoods—and to the kinds of moral and theological questions that haunt intellectually precocious Jewish kids, which is what Joel and Ethan Coen must have been.

A Serious Man
Directed by Joel Coen and Ethan Coen

A Serious Man is nominally set in 1967 Minneapolis, but its true setting is an Old Testament universe in which God is a living but not especially comforting presence, curses are real, and evildoing is punished even as staggeringly difficult efforts to live a moral life go unrewarded.

The protagonist is Larry Gopnik (Michael Stuhlbarg), a mathematics professor in his late thirties who is on the cusp of tenure—and whose life begins to unravel in the weeks before his stoner son's bar mitzvah. But Larry's story and the movie begin a century earlier, in Poland, when a traveling Jew (presumably his great-grandfather) returns home to his shtetl to tell his wife that he was helped on the road by a fellow traveler named Groshkover.

"God has cursed us," she replies (the entire scene is in Yiddish), because she knows this Groshkover and he has been dead three years. When Groshkover arrives at their house and asks for nourishment, she dubs him a demon and plants an ice pick in his chest. After a moment, when Groshkover laughs at her impudence, something that might be blood begins to seep from the wound and he staggers out. And so begins the curse that wends its way through *A Serious Man*.

The Poland prologue is a startling accomplishment, like an Isaac Bashevis Singer story committed to film (albeit one Singer himself did not write). And it suggests the high level of literacy on display here. I do not mean by this that the Coens write well, although they do; I mean that the movie itself suggests they have spent a great deal of time grappling with and taking seriously Jewish themes and ideas.

Gopnik struggles to do the right thing, and maintain his faith, as his world comes crashing down around him. His wife Judith has informed him that she is leaving him for the oleaginous Sy Ableman (the splendid Fred Melamed). Someone is writing vicious anonymous letters to his tenure committee. His older brother (Richard Kind), who believes his schizophrenic chicken scratches in a composition notebook provide the answer to the universe's uncertainty, is arrested for gambling and solicitation and needs an expensive lawyer he cannot afford, just at the time when a Korean student has offered Gopnik a bribe to change his grade.

Larry seeks answers from the community's rabbis; one is too young to be taken seriously, another a gladhander who loves telling a good story but has no counsel to offer, and the third a universally respected ancient sage who refuses to see him because, as his secretary says, "The rabbi is busy. He's thinking."

This parodic vision of the stultifying aspects of Jewish communal life, and its sharp satiric portrayal of deadening Jewish suburban life, have already provoked passionate comments from readers outraged at what they believe to be a work of intra-Jewish anti-Semitism. That view is understandable—and there are moments here and there, as when Judith and her daughter are shown slurping soup in a disgusting manner, that cross the line from pointed satire into ugly caricature. But I don't think it's right. The nihilism that afflicts most of the films of the Coen brothers, and makes so many of them so unsatisfying, is not in evidence here. Rather, *A Serious Man* is firmly in the tradition of the longstanding Jewish argument with God.

The late scholar Abraham Kaplan offered this example of it in a 1980 article in *Commentary*:

> In a memorable hasidic anecdote, a congregant declares on Yom Kippur: "True, I have sinned; but what about You, O God? What about the suffering of innocents, unjust persecutions, the triumph of evil? Let's call it quits—You forgive me, O God, and I will forgive You!" To which the [beloved sage] Levi Isaac [of Berdichev] is said to have responded, "No, no! You let Him off too easy!"

God is very much present in *A Serious Man*—and He is, shall we say, very just and not very nice. He smites two men in the movie, one in a car accident and one with a diagnosis of cancer. And He summons a storm, with the suggestion that all the bad behavior we have witnessed might just have caused Him to reconsider the Covenant.

Larry Gopnik's attempt to understand why he is being put through the wringer is met with a decided lack of interest by his fellow Jews, who have decided that there's no point in conducting the argument with God. But he can't help himself, even if he does himself no good by engaging in the inquiry.

Ultimately, this remarkable film, by leaps and bounds the best thing Joel and Ethan Coen have ever done, is an inspired gloss on the greatest Jewish joke there is. A shlepper dies, goes to the World to Come, and is introduced to God. "Answer me this one question," says the shlepper. "Are Jews the Chosen People?" Yes, God answers with a smile, the Jews are indeed the Chosen People. "Well," says the shlepper, "would you mind choosing somebody else for a change?" ♦

John Podhoretz, editor of Commentary, *is* THE WEEKLY STANDARD*'s movie critic.*

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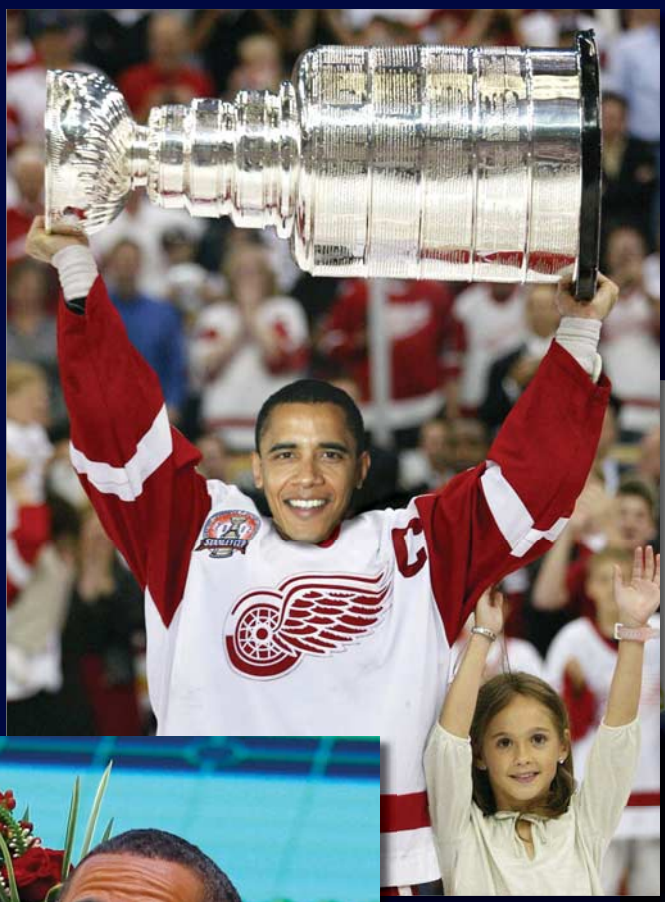
Parody



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